

The Abodes of Gods Series No 7

THE MANDIRS OF MAHARASTRA

A 13 - stringed divine harp



By

Prof. K.K. Moorthy

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Vide Page

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THE MANDIRS OF MAHARASTRA

A 13 - stringed divine harp

Covers 13 major shrines situated in

*Kolhapur, Pandharpur, Tuljapur, Phede, Jejuri,
Margaon, Alandi, Bhumashankar, Parli, Ellora, Shirdhi,
Tryambak and Avantika*

By

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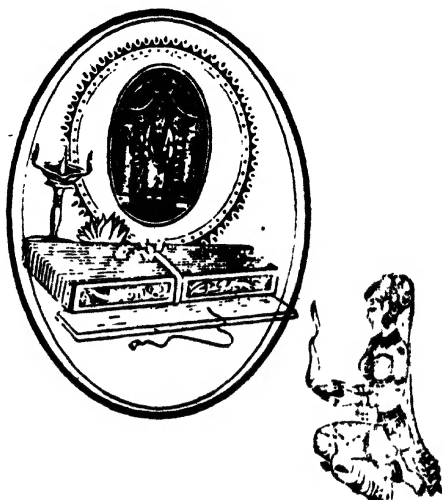
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INVOCATION



Soaked in bhaktirasa, the soil of Maharashtra produced illustrious children of great name
Trained by viramatas, the heroes bearded the lions atrocious sans force, but by probity
Blessed by Divinities, the saint-seers founding sublime sampradayas of eternal fame
Turned the land into Tapobhumi, Change my Lord this into Dhruvatara of piety.

INTRODUCTION

Ere you enter the state of Maharashtra, there blows over your ears, puffs of sublime breeze, saturated with the sounds of clanging of cymbals and singing of abhangas, in praise of supreme deities, invariably those of Panduranga Vittal, the darling Lord of both class and mass of the theist community of the entire erstwhile Bombay State, comprising the present Sourashtra and Maharashtra, renowned for its intense religio-political activity. The sons of the soil, tilling the fertile fields of Philosophy and Politics by their honest toil and moil, reaped bumper crops of FREEDOM to snapping the pasas binding mankind to this mundane world, or to its ruthless autocrats. The primacy of their rare culture stupified the worlds here on earth and there in heaven. Their exalted humanist approach to the down-to-earth problems and exemplary tenacity exhibited to solving them so exulted even the uncompromising hard-hearted antagonists, descending from the bloated high, hollow pedestal; they knelt before them in token of approval of the policies pursued. And the supreme soul-force of the highly evolved transformed beasts into saints, inanimate into ever-blooming and never-withering enticing sights that pleased celestials to that extent of appearing again and again for bestowing boons infinite that converted them into torch-bearers. In consequence, there emerged many schools of philosophy, like Ganesh Sampradaya, Datta Sampradaya, Bhagavatha Sampadaya Varkari Sampradaya, Nath Sampradaya that culminated in the spread of desim and humanism throughout the state, nay to the four corners of world. Hence the achievement of the highest seat in the east.

Situated between the Arabian blue to the west and arid zone to the east, with Sahyadri range running almost in the middle, this splendid state is blessed with an inexhaustible measure of natural resources of infinite variety that are feeding the hungry needy, both in and out of its bounds. Several sacred life-giving and ever-flowing rivers, taking origin in the high mountain region, in addition to irrigating millions of acres of land in their courses, covering hundreds of miles, lured even the Avatapurushas for permanent settlement, as far back as in the Dwaparayuga. Even earlier, say, from time immemorial to be specific, in the Kritayuga, and later in the Thretyuga also, the highest divinities chose this sacred land for enacting awe-some dramas. They left behind magnificent relics in several forms, their very sight purges one of the sins clinging to the body, and instil lofty idealism, enabling him to see inward first, and outward next that ensures a harmonious peaceful co-existence. To add to these ancient monuments, the sacred spots of habitation of modern nation-builders, like Tilak and Gandhi in the field of politics, and Jnaneswar and Tukaram in philosophy deserve visitation of immense significance. Why, the places of their birth and samadhis too have become national monuments of international importance, and as such, the state is dotted with countless visit-worthy places of both mythological importance and political significance. Among the scores of such places of perpetual interest and perennial inspiration, a judicious selection has listed down only twelve for instant visitation. And sure salvation too. Even though a cross-section of the selection reveals the premier saktipithas, Saiva Kshetras, Vaishnava thirthas, Sampradaya kendras, Siddhapurusha nilayas etc., embodying a fair representation of each type, it is inexhaustive. Limitation of space barred the admission of many, and so an appeal in made to the enthusiastic pilgrims and tourists to visit other similar kshetras, like the famous Ashtavinayaka Kshetras hinted in the Mayureswar of Morgoan wite-up. Likewise, many others mentioned elsewhere also. At any rate,

one should not miss the holy samadhis of the modern machine-age Mahasiddhapurushas, whose seats surpassed the yugas-old kshetras, and are drawing more followers than the latter. Steadily and surprisingly too. A visit made, I presume, to the twelve included-Kolhapur, Tuljapur, Pandharpur, Shirdhi, Bhamburda, Alandi, Elora, Morgao, Jejuri, Parli and Triyambak will certainly rouse irrefragable urge that itself will propel the wheels of your Darsanikakanksha to the rest; for the narration and array of factual information are so made, that they stop not till visiting them all. Now begins the yatra, with its first leg halting at the Mahadwara of MOTHER Mahalakshmi shrine to receiving her munificent blessings for successful completion.

Will you then kindly spare me a mintue to remember at this moment, all those responsible for steering this Vahan for you convenience? It is a MUST, for, expression of gratitude is not only a mark of culture, but a prime necessity for a carefree, earthly existence. So wait. Among the many high-souled, who extended unforgettable help first comes Sri K. Subba Rao, M.A., Editor, Saptagiri, who monitored and scrutinised the type-script submitted, for making it Aid-worthy. Discerning its merit, he passed it on to the higher authority with commendation. And it was okayed. His objectivity and critical acumen deserve all praise. I offer my whole-hearted gratitude to him with all humility due. I express my sincere thanks to the benign Experts Committee, adorned by a highly progressive young man for Chairman, and a scholarly luminary for Executive head for approving and extending AID to printing of this book. I bow to them and the members who lent their support with one voice. Of the Divinities BALAJI Mathridayanivasi takes precedence. Through a hierarchy of His human agency. He granted this golden chariot and made me its mover, although He alone is moving it unseen. I offer my prostrations to Him soulfully. Next comes my MOTHER Adiparasakti, who in the aspect of SARADA dwelling in my heart since the dawn of illumination of the efficiency of devotion and surrender lighted up an inextinguishable akhandajyoti to guiding the devotional community with a series of serene shafts of light for illumining their way to temples. Making a parikramana, I offer obeisance to Her. Finally, I extend my grateful thanks to several authors of books, folders and booklets particularly to Sri J.H. Dave and Sri M.S. Mate whose scholarly works "The Immortal India" and "Temples and Legends of Maharashtra" supplied me enough fuel to steering this chariot for your benefit. My daughter Kavitha and son Kiran discharged their routine duties ungrudgingly, as in the past. So, deserve God's benedictions. I owe my thanks to the dynamic Proprietor KRBE Printers Madras and his efficient staff for their excellent work and Sri C. Nageswara Rao Garu Manager, Visalandhra Vijayawada for extending full cooperation in the printing work. All is said everyone is paid his due except you the reader, of course awaiting my attention. So dear look, I am raising the curtain on the Archamurthi of Kolhapur temple for darsan. Circumambulate first and bow to her for grant of infinite luck and trouble-free journey. And then pray to several deities enshrined in many mini-shrines and grand pavilions, as you move from one corner to another for your salvation, and to my gratification too.

Your Sincerely,
K.K. Moorthy.

MOTHER MAHALAKSHMI OF KOLHAPUR

UNIQUENESS

There is one, and only one thing in the world that is rated higher, proved mightier, held holier, deemed superior, and loved dearer than everything and anyone else, say parents- instrumental for the birth; Guru-for opening the eyes to the realities of the world around; friends-for standing behind sans self through thick and thin of life; wife-the Sahadharmacharini - bonafide partner for sharing joys and sorrows in life; God-for creating everything out of His sweet will and abundant love, for peaceful and honourable existence and so on and so forth. Its potentialities are varied; life, eternal; faculty-capable of exceeding that of Brihaspathi; strength, making Ghatockacha bend his head; charms, far surpassing the celestial nymphs; tongue, splitting hair into million stands; sports, encircling the entire gamut of life from womb to tomb; sight, changing Jawan into Diwan and vice versa; and capacity, inexhaustibly invincible, inestimably incomparable etc., etc., etc. In fine, it can hold the world to ransom. The impact of its Viswarupa is known to one and all, the moment its legal tender worth is expressed. There is no sentient, rational, mentally sound and living being, free from the snares of this i.e. MONEY. Although it is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and non-pariel in all, and all in all, it has limitations. Sure, it is above all only on earth and over mankind that too. But the celestials are immune from this; for, they are above humans i.e. devoid of Mannism-greed and egotism. So its malignity does not enter the heaven, nor does it hold such sway on them, as it is on earth. Among them, some on certain occasions might have been swayed by passion for power or pomp but certainly not to MONEY, as it is seen on earth, where it has succeeded in demonstration of its powers, like recreating heaven

on earth, Nandanavanas in Arabian deserts; paradises under saline jalarasis; EL Dorados around the poles.....

Such infinite abstract might, when changed into tangible, living form-personified, it goes by the auspicious name of Mahalakshmi - the presiding deity of wealth. She is the dearest spouse of Lord Mahavishnu, who enshrined her on His chest. But she has taken her seat on earth in Kolhapur in the state of Maharashtra. Ever since the day of her descent, she made this holy place as her permanent abode and started demonstrating of her lilas that have been luring devotees over centuries. On account of her settlement, this place acquired many sacrosanct features that attracted global attention. Its plus points are numerous - it is one of the premier Sakthipithas to begin with; it gave asylum to other religions like Jainism and Buddhism that flourished side by side happily and amicably without crossing swords on any occasion; it is this temple that attracted Vaishnavate saints, like Jnaneswar, Namadev and sage Parashar; it is the family deity of illustrious Eknath Maharaj; it was the capital of Shilharas for nearly 300 years; it was the image of this Goddess replaced by Shambaji; it served as the capital for the descendants of Chatrapati Shivaji and Bhosales; it was this place, declared greater than Kashi by Lord Vishnu; it is this temple that received many valuable endowments from the foreigners; it is here the three Goddesses - Mahalakshmi, Mahasaraswati and Mahakali are enshrined in the central shrine; it is this city founded by Padmavarma son of Yadu; it is here Kasha did penance; it is this kshetra that kept up its eminence in all the seven kalpas with different names under distinguished rulers; and it is this kshetra that confers both moksha and bhoga salvation and material benefits to all.

Renowned in puranas as pilgrimage centre, prominent as the capital of many dynasties; visited by pravaktas and acharyas, patronised by imperial families; associated with the sports of the Trimurthi, eulogised in devotional literature, worshipped by eminent Peshwas, the holy Mother and Kshetra have been drawing pilgrims since time immemorial.

SOURCES

As it has carved out an eminent niche in the temple that Bharat Khanda is, many immortal works embody a vast corpus of information that highlight its origin, dieties, rulers, bhaktas and the like. Among them, Karvir Mahatmya, Kolhapur Mahatmya, Devibhagavata; Matsya, Padma Markandeya and Brahmanda Puranas and the Mahabharat, Harivamsa deserve special mention. They embody many outstanding episodes and illustrate its glory in full. Some Jain scriptures, like Brihatkatha Kosha also embody certain episodes dealing with the greatness of this place. Besides, the archives furnish several facts with dates, like the endowments made by the rulers and the philanthropists. Patience and labour yield much more invaluable information fit for several doctoral theses, since certain parts of the temples - Hindu, Jain and Buddhists are lying hidden due to convulsions in the earth that occurred in the past.

ANTIQUITY

Being a Premier Kshetra with a remarkable spirit of religious toleration, there are several accounts shedding light on its glory since time immemorial. Each religion and every sect has its own version, that elevated its sanctity to the Himalayan Peaks, as it were; contradictions if exist, they need not be viewed seriously, nor deemed as packs of lies. Limitation of space admitted only a few, and sure they suffice the purpose now.

KARAVIR MAHATMYA

Karavir mahatmyam glorifies this kshetra with the account that Lord Mahavishnu created two mokshapuris; one - Kolhapur, where he chose to remain in the form of Mahalakshmi to conferring bhoga through material wealth to his devout adorers, whereas in the other - Kasi in the form of Siva, giving Mukti. In

Harivamsa, it has another version and it traces the origin to Yaduvamsa back to Haryashva, the founder. The story goes that Yadu, son of Haryashva went to the sea with his wives for jalakrida one day. While watching the play of waves in their rise and fall, he was taken to Nagaloka by its Dhumravarna, who treating him lavishly with utmost honour gave him his five enchanting daughters in marriage; for he was renowned for his prowess and righteousness. Five sons of supreme virtues of head and heart were born and they bore remarkable marks of rulership exemplified by their ennobling actions that stamped out them as valorous princes of high principles.

After training, they implored their father to entrust them tasks worthy of their distinguished, yet distinct natures. At once Yadu entrusted to them the formidable task of establishing kingdom to the South of Vindhya. The first son Muchkund carried out his behest of making Purika as the capital for the kingdom he established between the Vindhya and Rikshavan mountains; the second son Harita was given charge of protecting the out lying island countries of the empire; the third son Saras founded the Karunchapaura; the fourth Padmavarma entering the heart of Sahyadris laid the foundation of city of Karvir, and so the region was then known as Padmavat after the founder. Thus the Yadu clan systematically colonised the Deccan region. After centuries - precisely on the death of Kamsa, Jarasandha, the king of Magadha and a close ally of Kamsa, with a view to breaking vengeance began a series of military campaigns against Yadu clans, ruling with Mathura as their capital. But was repelled by the heroic yadus for 17 times. Under the advice of the well-wisher Vikadru, Krishna and Balarama moved towards Karvir, but Parasuram chancing to meet them advised to launching of giri yuddha - hill warfare from Gomantak, as Karvir was ruled then by a cruel monarch by name shringar. Acting upon the sage counsel, the brothers gave a crushing defeat to Jarasanda. Soon after the victory, Krishna and Balaram helped Chediraj, their distant Kinsman in his battle against Shringar. After killing him, they enthroned Sakradeva, the son of Chediraj. So the rule of Yadava clan thus became paramount in the Deccan region too.

KOLHAPURA MAHATMYA

Kolhapura Mahatmya traces the name of the capital - Karvirpur to the progeny of Brahma, the Creator. According to mythology, Brahma had three manasaputras - Lavana, Kolha and Gaya. On obtaining boons from him and Siva, Gaya and Lavana turned lokakantakas and terrorised the world, making it unbearable to live in both for gods and humans. When Devendra along with the affected prayed for Lord Vishnu's intervention; he killed them both at once. The youngest Kolha for the purpose of wreaking vengeance did penance propitiating Brahma, his own father. Pleased, Brahma blessed him to be ruler of the Universe unchallenged. Returning, Kolha found to his surprise, one by name Sukesha ruling the country. Killing him in the battle, he enthroned his eldest son Karvir and went to forest for the Vanaprasthasram. Karvir unleashed demonic forces to avenge the unjust death of his uncles. There was all round destruction - hermitages were burnt; temples, pulled down; yagasalas, desecrated; innocent, slaughtered etc. The afflicted when appealed for mercy, Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu waged a dreadful war for long, since Karvir was a hero of great mettle, yet Lord Siva slew him in the battle. He named the city as Karvirnagar in accordance with the request of the dying warrior.

Learning about the death of Karvir, Kolhasur returned, and, realising that through the presiding deity - Mahalakshmi's compassion alone, the gods scored victory over his son, he won over her with his penance and requested her to quit the city for 100 years. She granted and went to the Himalayas. Kolhasur sought retribution - he created a second Naraka- Yama's capital on earth by his atrocities with an unprecedented ferocity. Blood flowed and corpses were piled up rising sky high, violence rocked, when revenge danced naked. To wiping the tears of the victims, the goddess descended on the city with an army and aided and abetted by Ranka Bhairav, Kal vetal, Siddha - Batukesvar and sister Chamundi. Assuming the most dreadful eighteen armed form, she entered the war theatre. Shivering all through at their mere sight, he accepted defeat but asked for three boons. The place of death

should become a thirtha; the second - the goddess should come back to dwell permanently here naming the city after him and thirdly to cut a fruit called Kohala ceremoniously every year in his honour. She sealed it with instant approval. Though there was trouble from asuras from time to time, the Goddess quelled them then and there. Thus throughout the seven kalpas, the place enjoyed eminence due to the boundless anugrah of the Mother. And it was called by a distinct name in each Kalpa, such as Kamagiri in the first Kalpa; Padmalaya in the second; Sivalaya in the third; Brahmalaya in the fourth; Yakshalaya in the fifth; Rakshalaya in the sixth and Kolhapur in the last Kalpa due to Kolha's reign and according his wish.

THE SILHARAS LEGEND

It was the capital of Silharas reputed to be the descendants of Vidyadharas for over three long centuries. Though this historical evidence is preserved in the archives, certain events that took place are so imbued with mystery that they appear mythological. It appears that the illustrious prince Jeemutavahana while rambling near the hill heard by chance the heart-rending wails of Sankhachuda, sitting draped in red dress on the altar to be eaten away by Garuda. When enquired, he learnt that according to the agreement reached between the Nagas and Garuda, every day one Naga was to be offered to Garuda for food to saving the race from total extinction. And that day it was his family's turn to send one to Garuda. He being the only male member, the grief become infinite, but unavoidable. Taking pity on Sankhachuda, Jeemuthavahana volunteered to substitute himself for the comfort of Sankhachuda's parents, although he had married only on the previous day. Much against the protests, he allowed himself to be eaten away by Garuda. Malayavati, his chaste, young wife who came running with retinue, found her lord dead. The sorrow of the two families needless to say was soul-stirring. Then Malayavati prayed to Mother Mahalakshmi for Mangalyabiksha. Would the Mother quash such streaming petitions? Would the chastity go unrewarded? Mother Mahalakshmi blessed the new weds with the

request along with several boons. Moved by the Mother's compassionate act, Garuda not only terminated the agreement with instant effect, but stopped once for all that inhuman practice. Above all, he sprinkled nectar over the heaps of bones of the Nagas he had killed for food previously. All the dead were revived to life. This happened here and it was immortalised by Sri Harsha in his famous Sanskrit play Naganandam.

HISTORICITY

The history of Kolhapur is a strange combination of mythology and history. Upto ninth century, legendary accounts are available and are abundant also. When Rastrakutas come to power with Kolhapur as capital, its history unfolds slowly. It is with Amoghavarsha's inscriptions in 817 AD, its historicity begins. Several endowments made to the temple are recorded on copper plates and walls and they shed light on the names of rulers and their reign. Strangely enough, the first inscription brings to light Amoghavarsh's benign rule and the paternal care, he bestowed on people. It states that this celebrated ruler cut one of his fingers to making an offer to the Mother for bringing peace to the country, when there was crisis. Kadmabas who followed, likewise made offerings to the Mother on several occasions. Then came Silaharas, whose rule was blessed by the Mother on several occasions including that of giving life to Jeemuthavahana. All these Hindu kings were ardent worshippers of Mahalakshmi, though some of them were Jains by religion. Some other rulers, like Kalyan Chalukyas and Yadavas also endowed to the temple lavishly.

Inscriptions and literary works of medieval times make numerous references to the temple. Maratha Peshwas also extended grants sumptuously but due to the Islamic impact, particularly during Adil Shah's reign, the Goddess had to conceal herself in a priest's house for long. When the Marathas ascended to power reinstitution started with the efforts of Shidoji Hindura Gorpady on the Vijayadasami day of the year 1637, corresponding to 26.9.1715. From that auspicious moment, her glory once again

rose like fountain and heralded to the world that this Adyantarahita, Sarvabhayaprada Mahalakshmi had inaugurated her benign rule from her favourite seat. And this former Kaveri once again became an unparalleled Punya kshetra and justified its place in the list of six others, like Virupaksha, Srisaila, Pandharpur, Srirangam and Sethubhandan renowned for conferring both bhoga-luxurious life and also salvation - moksha. The name and glory of Kolhapur spread far and wide in such incredible speed to the extent that Lord Siva felt some tremors, a feeling that Kasi his own abode might pale into insignificance soon. So during his casual talk with Lakshmi, he broached the topic and asked the reason for the rapid growth of Kolhapur. She frankly admitted that her conferring Bhoga was the main cause. As the doubt still lurked in the corner, it irked him. So he sought clarification from Lord Mahavishnu. Soon he took up a balance and placed the glory of Kolhapur in one pan and that of Kasi in the other for visual representation of the fact. Alas the pan of Kasi went up and dangled. Being high-souled, he turned to Mahalakshmi and said - Long live thy glory! And departed with a sweet smile, seeing the Mother smiling at his wish and her rise. Such was the position of Kolhapur then.

THE TEMPLE

Of the many places of worship, such as the Jain Mandirs, Buddhist stupas etc. Mahalakshmi shrine, the focal point of irresistible attraction arrests the attention of the visitors by its tall towers, lofty arches, huge mandaps and grand dipmalas even from a distance. As the entire structure is built on the elevated place called Brahmapuri, it is an important landmark visible for miles around, although cement jungles are trying to conceal her grandeur. Its high towers jutting into sky over the tall buildings give it a conspicuous imposing appearance. This star attraction as the principal centre of hectic religious activity starts from early dawn and goes up to late hour in the night. Built in the form of a cross, it goes by the architectural name of Hemapanti and it is a typical specimen of Medieval style of Deccan temples. It is surrounded by

■ massive prakara with stately entrances adorned with tall towers. Entering through the Mahadwara facing the west, the visitors see rows of dipmalas on either side of the gate. A big mandap called Garuda Mandap of huge dimensions with square pillars and foliated arches, built in the characteristic Maratha architectural style comes into sight first. Another Mandap housing a four foot high Ganesh image lies adjacent to it. A little further up is located the central hall, housing all the three shrines dedicated to the august deities. The image of Mahalakshmi popularly known as Ambabai is installed on a high pedestal under an imposing dome. To its north and south are installed the images of Mahasaraswathi and Mahakali in separate shrines. There are a large number of Parivara devatas installed in several prominent places in the campus in minishrines and beautiful pavillions. As this All-merciful Mahalakshmi played host to several gods and goddesses by accommodating them in appropriate places, she lifts the souls of the visitors of all faiths beyond description. The images of Siddhi Vinayak, Navagrahas, Mahishasura Mardini, Vithal Rukhmai, Radhakrishna, Rama-Lakshmana Sita, Siva, Datatreya, Surya, Seshasayi, Kalabhairav, Tuljabhavani, Kankabhairava are only a few among several others fittingly enshrined in grand cells with arcades. The sculpture of the figures in graceful poses and right proportions greatly heighten their glory and beckon attention. The garbhagriha is two storeyed, the lower one for Mother Mahalakshmi and the upper one for Lord Siva and Nandi. The niches facing the three cardinal directions are housing the idols of Venkatesh, Kalyani and Gowri Shankar.

THE ARCHAMURTHI

The enchanting image of Mother Mahalakshmi about three feet in height, is installed on a raised bhadrapith. It is carved in black stone. She reveals in standing postures with four arms adorned with ayudhas, like the lower right hand holding a fruit called matulinga, the upper right a big size mace, Kaumodaka its head touching the ground; upper left hand Khalataka - shield and the lower left Panpatra - a bowl. The crown adorning the Mother

is beautified with the figures of cobra hood and a Siva linga with a yoni around it. There is evidence that this Karaviravasini - Mahalakshmi was worshipped as Mahasakti. The iconographic aspect and the existence of sriyantra in the corner of the wall along with certain rites performed here prove beyond doubt that this was a renowned Saktipitha in the beginning. The architectural design of the garbhagriha built with the entrance facing the west has enriched the sanctity further with the falling of Sun's rays through the window on the image for three days in a year. This sight is deemed extremely auspicious and people in thousands avail the sight of the Mother's image bathed in the golden rays of the setting sun. Are the architects devoid of devotion? Sure, they put their souls into construction to enhance its divinity.

THE LEGEND OF MANIKARNIKA KUND

There is a sacred pond in this court called Manikarnika Kund. And it has an odd origin. The story goes that in the third Kalpa, when Gouri Shankar were the presiding deities of this shrine, Mother Gowri lost her ear ring by mishap. Anon the ganas started the quest and delved the earth so deep that they made a big hollow, and at last they succeeded in finding it. Gratified at recovering, Lord Siva turned the deep pit into a thirtha and called it Manikarnika after her Manikundal. Since then, the visitors bathe in it before praying to the Mother. With many such miracles and awe inspiring episodes of the deities installed, the shrine detains the devotees hours together in the campus and liberates them when prayed soulfully.

THE PUJAS AND FESTIVALS

The regular worship is offered five times a day as is the practice in Maharashtra. Attendance at three sessions a day for a period of six fortnights confers great merit. The first puja starts at 5 AM with the Suprabhatam - awakening ritual. According to tradition, a torch is taken round the sanctum sanctorum with

singing of hymns. Then begins abhisheka - bathing the icon in milk etc., followed by decoration with sandal paste, garlands shimmering robes and dazzling diamond jewels. Prayers in song and chants are offered. The second session called shodasopachari puja begins at 8 AM. This is quite elaborate and upacharas are many like avahana, padya, 'arghya, achamana, snana, alankarana, dhupa-diparadhana, arati, naivedya, dakshina and parikramana. The third puja being very important some more rituals are added. It is offered to the accompaniment of band music played in the nagarkhana. The evening puja called Panchopachari and the last one reaches the finale with shejaarati, when the Mother is put to sleep with fine songs. Along with these daily ritualistic pujas, there are some others like Palkhi seva and Ratostava.

A QUEER UTSAV

Another interesting temple festival is that the Utsavamurthi is taken out on the Aswini Sukla Panchami in procession to a small temple called Temblai, lying at about five kilometres away to the main temple. It has a story interesting. The Temblai, according to legends is the younger sister of Mahalakshmi. Due to some minor misunderstanding over a trifle, there ensued a quarrel between the sisters, and so she left home and settled down permanently here in a separate mandir. Out of boundless love for sister, Ambabai visits Temblai every year on the fifth day of the Aswini. Would not the genuine affliction cross the emotional floods? Anger does not taint the affection at any time.

Among the many unique features found is that there are no annual festivals as such, though on auspicious occasions like Navaratri etc. huge crowds overflow the courtyards. The temple is otherwise crowded everyday as a matter of fact; for, according to the customs of Maharashtra, people in large numbers and families with kith and kin visit this place several times a year, either to redeem the vows taken on auspicious occasions, or make petitions for Mother's mercy whenever any Subhakarya is undertaken. The tradition of offering gifts to the Mother on fulfilment of desires like

child birth, marriage etc. is honoured with great fervour and fanfare and it is called Navas in Marathi. As the compassionate Mother fords them across the ocean of grief effortlessly and surely, their visits are more frequent and constant. Another strange feature in practice here is, the temple prescribes no fixed routine rates for any kind of prayer service desired. Yet the performers offer lavishly in cash or kind. There are two common practices which are frequently observed. One is filling the lap and the other is presentation of Sadi-Choli to the Mother along with other auspicious things like haldi, kumkum etc. Prasad like Phedas, kumkum etc. are given to the devotees. After prayers, visitors go to several other sacred places situated within a radius of nearly 10 KM, since the Mother's kshetra extends over a large area and includes several shrines dedicated to important powerful deities. Ardent theists visit them all to gain merit to the full after visiting the main temple. Among the visit worthies, the Vithoba's temple resembling the Mother's temple; Mahakali temple, the yellamma temple, where unmarried women make vows to her and get their desires fulfilled are most popular and hence visitation is deemed a must. Moreover, there are two underground temples Khandoba and Karthikaswami here and they also attract the visitors. The Jain temples and other Mutts, like Sankeshwar Sankarachari deserve visitation for benedictions. In addition to these, there is the famous shrine dedicated to Jyothiba at a distance 15 Km. which is visit worthy.

SOME SHRINES SUPERB - A BIRD'S EYE-VIEW

WARDHA - SEWAGRAM

Set amidst serene, colourful surroundings, this small but significant hamlet shot up into political firmament in 1930, when Bapu, Father of the Nation chose it as his abode to carrying on the nation-building activities, after the Salt Satyagraha Movement. His firm resolve of not moving out of this, until the aliens were packed off from this soil was welcomed by patriots, particularly that of Sair Jamanlal Bajaj, a thriving cotton merchant of Wardha. Hailing the decision lustily, he invited and provided him all the necessities for comfortable stay. Wardha became Sewagram-village of service after embarking upon, and successful completion of several social reforms, like eradication of untouchability etc. Later, it metamorphosed into the supreme head-quarters of the freedom struggle. Many international luminaries visited and lived with Bapu sharing the joys of humble living, plain thinking, truth speaking etc.

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LORD PANDURANGA VITHAL OF PANDHARPUR

UNIQUENESS

Father and Mother are the visible gods on earth. This basic concept of Hinduism is upheld with great veneration by all in totality, sans difference of opinion. One either believes in God, or does not, but there is none, who derecognises the role played by these adorable gods, responsible for making a tiny sack of blood and flesh into MAN, deserving to be called the crown of creation. Each has a duty onerous, and begins where God's ends, and if man deserves to be called the true rational being, it is all due to their work. The mother bearing in her womb for nine long months that entire weight, decidedly exceeding that of the mass of the Himalayas in fact, presents a priceless one to the world. And then nurses and nourishes with her own sap, round the clock and lives only to strive throughout to see her progeny taking the highest honourable seat, by paving the way with her bones and flesh for their progress towards the final goal of emancipation. All within the four walls of her kingdom. Hence, the supreme providence confessed that her debt remains for ever beyond redemption.

Father, by toil and sacrifice strives to make his progeny, a proud citizen of the motherland, who honestly works to throw a halo round her, despite living on water of affliction and bread of sorrow. Does he merit to be accorded inferior status, or honoured less? Neither of them deserves derecognition by any one, in any point of time. Even consciously or unconsciously. Whoever sees divinity in the parents and adores them fittingly, he receives, adulation and his life too becomes worthy of emulation. Scriptures affirm this gem of truth, and literature immortalises it in all its

genres. Why, the Omniscient God besides sealing it with instant approval, hastens to honour and reward that illustrious Dhruvatara and prefers to be at his beck and call, deeming him greater in powers and possessing unexcelled excellences. Nowhere in India this supreme truth is demonstrated and adored as it is in Pandharpur, enshrining the image of one outstanding pithru sevaparayana whose monumental devotion to parents made the Lord of Lords stand on a piece of brick, offered as a seat to stand and wait till the routine services for the father were over. And the image of that Highest in a characteristic posture is installed in another temple to perpetuate the memory of His appreciation of the filial piety of that diamond of a man, who proved service to parent was above God. To all, at any time. These two temples built on the bank of Chandrabhaga river in memory of that Bhaktajana parijata and Pitriseva parayana have been luring lakhs of devotees since time immemorial. They have several other unique features that brought to the state of Maharashtra a glittering feather to the envy of many more making similar claims.

For, this temple of Panduranga Vittal, among all in the state is holding the greatest sway over the class and mass of the Marathi theistic community; it is to this temple Varakari Sampradaya started and spread far and wide; it is to this temple several palanquins of great saints come yearly once; it is here in this temple casteless, classless oneness emerges and receives full honours; and it is into this deity many illustrious saints, like Jnaneswar, Tukaram, Namdev merged; it is this archamurthi revealing himself in the form of Omkar; it is this deity standing on the brick is awaiting his devout bhakta Pundarik to come and receive boons; it is this deity deemed to be the typical symbol of Marathi religious life; it is this deity that was carried away to Vijayanagar by Sri Krishna Devaraya; it is to this deity, rulers from Karnataka made lavish endowments; it is this deity kept hidden by one Raghoji during the Muslim invasion and returned it to the temple authorities after receiving a large consideration; and it is this deity that was held in ransom for some time by some unscrupulous men; it is this deity considered as the embodiment

of the three Vedas; it is this deity advocating catholicity as evidenced by emancipating the Muslims even; it is on the glory of this Lord, thousands of abhangas were sung by devotees in their ecstatic raptures and it is this deity adored as Kamadhenu by the pious bhaktas.

Eulogised as the Pratyaksha daivam by the Marathi saints; monopolised by the whole mass of people of Maharashtra; popularised by the spirit of catholicity; endowed by several rulers, this august presiding deity-Pandurang Vittal has been drawing lacs of devotees over several centuries now.

ANTIQUITY

The glory of this kshetra owes its origin to one great devotee of Vittal. His life is a standing testimony to the power of filial piety which brought down God and made Him wait at the portal. Many literary works embody the life history of this Pundarik. Among them Panduranga Mahatmya takes precedence over others. It runs - there lived in the past a brahmin couple in this kshetra, and were called Jnanadev and Muktabai. They had a son called Pundarik, who although acquired proficiency in the sacred lore, never cared to realise the place given to the parents due to his infatuation for his charming wife. He turned self centred, immoral and brutal. Besides, he developed sadistic pleasure in ill-treating his parents. In their ripe old age at it. Neither did he provide decent food and dress to them, nor took pity at their failing health. To add to this, he saw them over-worked, attending to domestic chores to making his wife enjoy a life of luxury, wrapped up in unethical grace. Certain legends attribute this prodigal life to his attachment to a courtesan, whose glowing exterior and honied words, blinded him to the extent of emptying all his treasure to her. He unceremoniously sent his parents away from the house under the pretext of stealing some jewels. Noble parents bore all torments and humiliation, for he was their only issue, and what was more the apple to their eyes. When left to themselves, they proceeded to Kasi to breathe their last at the sacred feet of the Lord Visweswar.

Realisation dawned when he lost all - material and physical wealth due to ~~maneuver~~ of that star, who twinkled more brighter during the day time. The penitent destitute started wandering under the dead weight of disease that the morning star presented to him. It so chanced, he stayed for the night in an asram of great sage Kukkut by name, who listening to his pathetic tale played host for the night. His sleep was distributed in the dead of night by the sweeping sounds of some persons. Waking up, he saw three ugly women briskly sweeping the courtyard of the asram. After watching long, he found them gradually transforming themselves into damsels. Wonder struck, he approached and implored them to tell him about their odd life. They said that they were the holy rivers - Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswati and due to accumulation of sins purged of by the sinners in them by bathing, they turn ugly and disease affected by the night. And they purify themselves by sweeping the asram precincts of this sage, who was second to none but himself in filial piety. They would get back their divine beauty and powers after completing the work and depart soon to their places. It was their routine work. Listening to their account, he found himself a changed man absolved of his sin, because of his contact with them and filling his eyes with the holy forms of those lokapavanis. In the morning he asked the sage the secret of his powers. His answer was brief but precise - "My strength lies in my pitrubhakti, and the blessings of those living gods made me another god, fit to be adored by the gods even"! When enlightened on the might of pitruseva and the punya it confers, he regretted and turned a new leaf in life. At once he set out in search of the lost treasure! He found them and washed their feet with tears of genuine repentance. And started adoring them with a tenacity unheard of, and fervour a model to the humanity for all times. As he cared nothing, knew nothing, indulged in nothing-craved for nothing, except serving the aged parents, his soul evolved to that stage of bringing down Lord Krishna to his door-step to confer boons. But he was otherwise busy then with massaging of his father's legs - a routine seva and hence asked him to wait standing on the brick, he threw outside till he completed his regular work. What an audacity! Could it be tolerated? It was not only tolerated

but rewarded magnanimously. When met the waiting Lord, he soulfully prayed for forgiveness. The Lord on the other hand said that before his pitrudeva, he was insignificant and his action was emulation worthy. Pundarik overwhelmed with joy solicited the Lord to stay there for ever. "Amen" was the Lord's answer. Hence, the image of Lord Krishna standing on brick, and his becoming Vittala - standing on the brick according to Kanada language. Standing in that posture of akimbo - hands on the hips resembling the shape of auspicious Omkara has another story fascinating and background fantastic.

EMERGENCE OF RADHA

It begins in Vaikunta. The time of action was a pleasant dusk. Sri Mahavishnu was seen absorbed then in the colourful spectacle of the west, bathed in the mellowed light of the setting Sun, caressed by cool fragrant breeze, coming over His Nandanodyan, when Sachidevi, wife of Devendra stood before him. All alone in her full splendour. Up from his dreamworld, he requested with all decorum due, to inform him the reason of her surprising visit, unattended by any companion. And without appointment at it. Quivering all through, as shyness enveloped her whole frame, she let out that she had been pining for amorous union with him, though she knew, it was unbecoming on her part to entertain such lewd desire and it was rather sinful too. Eventhough she tried all means to suppress that impious instinct, the temptation of his jaganmohanakara was irresistably too much for her, and so there she was. But Vishnu politely and sincerely rejected her advances, as it would prove disgraceful to both. Moved by the moist eyes, he said that her desire would be fulfilled in her next birth, when he would be born as Krishna and she as Radha. Despaired Sachi devi left him at once.

The second scene shifts to Dwaraka. As ordained she became Radha, and Lord Mahavishnu incarnated as Krishna on a mighty mission. In Mathura, off their houses they moved together

before Krishna's marriage with Rukmini, and in Dwarka after marriage. Loyal Krishna confessing his alliance with Radha to Rukmini, promised to snap ties of moha with the former. Once, Rukmini found his transgression. It was too much for her. To teaching him a lesson in silent, non-violent way, she resorted to his conversion by a sublime way of exacting a boon of his loyalty to her through penance. Anon she reached the far off Dindirvana and implemented her determination. Was it necessary? Would Krishna endure the pangs of separation? How long could he hang about with others? He made a thorough search and found her in the Dindirvan. Meeting, he tried to win her back, giving her whatever she desired, but desiring his total absolute, unconditioned submission, she showed a fake unalterable austerity. Failing in all, despite emptying the Kubera's treasure chest he launched a counter tapa and stood there before her with arms resting on waist, eyes looking straight upon her, but in vain. He stood in that posture for twenty eight yugas unmoved, and would have continued for yugas umpteen, but for the necessity of giving darsan to Pundarik and bless him on recognition of his unparalleled filial affection. Leaving her there, Krishna appeared before Pundarik in the same posture of his tapa before Rukmini which being extremely bewitching, Panduranga solicited him to remain in the same form as boon. Hence, the self-same beautiful posture for all the adorers. Hail Panduranga hail! you not only feasted your eyes with that enchanting form but enabled mankind to sharing of your fortune for all. It has a symbolic significance too.

HISTORICITY

The temple is rich in historical evidence, richer in legends and richest in devotional literature. Inscriptional proofs consisting in grants made to the temple start from the 516 AD, when Avidhaya, a Rastrakuta king granted four villages to a brahmin. Jayad vitha copper plate grant mentions this Pandharpur as Panduranapapalli. Next reference is made to the deity in 1236 AD. It was when Hoyasala king Someswar made a grant of the

village-Hiria Caranj to the deity. Later in 1237 AD another epigraph bears evidence in the form of Chauryaishicha Lekha with philanthropists and devotees making many donations to the temple. There is evidence that this temple lured many Kannada bhaktas particularly, due to its being a part of the Hoyasala Kingdom, then extending beyond this place. There is a conjuncture that Hoyasala Vishnu Vardhan alias Bittideva built this temple at the request of the theists. When he visited this place, during his northerly campaigns, he named the deity Vithal, a derivation of Bittideva, and it is in accordance with the tradition of naming of the shrine and deity after the builder. The name Vithal, may or may not represent Bitti deva, but there is ample proof to show that Hoyasalas made several kinds of endowments to the temple. Next donors of great importance are the Marathas and a few Sardars too. Chatrapati Rajarama, the grand son of Shivaji made annual grants for conducting the regular worship. His successors followed suit. Sahu too donated to the temple in several ways. The sanads elaborately describe the growth of temple, since the ruling princes settled many cases referred to them by a wide varieties of temple sevakarīs like Badavas, Danges, Divitties etc., whenever the snaring of temple revenue presented problems. The Bhosales and Peshwas intervened to set right the troubles of many kinds. All these references bear dates and details. So, archives furnish enough evidence of this temple's history from the sixth century onwards.

SAINT BHANUDAS AND HIS DEVOTION

Certain curious, rather semi historic anecdotes also throw light on the glory of the temple. It appears, during the Muslim invasions, the Hindu kings preserved the sanctity of the temple with all their might. An interesting event is woven round the Vijayanagara king Krishnadevaraya. Incidentally it confirms the tradition that the presence of the presiding deity here, was never continuous. And to save it from destruction by the Islamic iconoclasts certain devotees managed to conceal it in their houses. The Vijayanagara king had taken the image to the capital when the

temple was closed as a safety measure, and installed it in a grand temple, befitting his imperial status and to its spiritual eminence. Regular worship on a grand scale with unprecedented fanfare was offered there, but here in Pandharpur, the Varkaris finding the absence of Lord Vitthal searched and learnt that it was kidnapped by the king. So, a famous saint by name Bhanudas, the great grand father of Eknath Maharaja started on foot, singing all the way and reached the temple. Holding the holy feet of the Lord, he pleaded for his return, but the Lord consoled him to wait, since he did not like to wound the king, a great devotee in every sense of the term. He resorted to a stretegem - demonstration of Krishnaniti. While assuring to follow him, he put his tulasimala round the neck of Bhanudas, craftily adding a diamond necklace along with it. The loss of necklace was searched for the next day, and the thief - Bhanudas was taken to the court. The judge on the circumstantial evidence ordered the capital punishment. He was taken to the place, where a sula - spike was erected. All through the trial and later too, he did nothing than singing songs in praise of the Lord, believing in God's protection. When he was taken to the place of sula, to the utter amazement of all-the by-standers, the pole started blooming into branches, bearing leaves, flowers, fruits etc. When the oddity was reported to Krishna Deva Raya, he rushed to the spot and prayed to him for forgiveness, forgetting the folly perpetrated by his people. On knowing the purpose of his visit and the trouble crupted in Pandharpur, he made immediate arrangements for the safe return of the image with escort and a long procession of the people.

The image arrived at Pandharpur on the Ekadasi day. It was a grand affair and so Pandharpur turned itself into a Bhooloka Vaikunta with chariot procession, bhajan, bhojan programmes etc. Even today, in memory of it, the annual festival on the Ekadasi is celebrated on a grand scale. Mysterious are the ways of that mysterious Mahavishnu! This absence of the Lord was longer. It was stolen or held in ransom for shorter periods now and then. And on certain occasions in the Medieval period, the image fell prey to the avaricious priests, who smuggled it away to receiving

huge sums of amount later, and it was reinstated in payment of huger sums of amount. Deprivity knows no law! Is not the mouth of avarice as wide as well, and is ever open as a matter of fact?

THE RIVER CHANDRABAGHA

It is customary to take a dip in a river or pushkarini before availing the darsan of the archamurthis of any kshetra. Here it is the river Bhima going by the name of Chandrabhaga, and is the first spot visited by the pilgrims on reaching the kshetra. It has many visit-worthy places, like the Vishnupad, Pundarika temple and other shrines on its bed. After taking bath in the sacred river, devotees visit the Vishnupad temple built on a rock and has flights of stairs on four sides. It is a beautiful temple enshrining the foot prints of Lord Krishna and his cow. It has many images on the pillars and they are impressive. Next is the sacred temple enshrining the samadhi of Pundarik responsible for the Panduranga's shrine here. The object of worship here is Sivalinga, fitted with a brass cover resembling that of Siva form bust upwards. The head-gear of the Lord is adorned with the coils of a five hooded cobra. And it is exceedingly enticing. Huge brass images of Jaya Vijaya -- the Dwarapalakas installed at the entrance lend majesty to this small shrine. The regular worship is offered to this Sivalinga and it starts early in the morning. After this the brass kavacha is placed and adorned with silk bordered dhoti and garlands. Important sevas and festivals like Sivaratri are celebrated and they attract huge crowds. As the Samadhi contains a great pitrubhaktiparayana of immortal glory, it is visited with great fervour. After this, the pilgrims straightaway walk towards the main shrine situated at half a kilometre's distance. This sacred river bank is always crowded and the bhajan programmes at several points make this a daily MELA of perennial attraction.

THE TEMPLE

It is fairly a big temple built in the heart of the town, on the bank of Chandrabagha, a tributary of river Krishna. It is surrounded by a wall with eight entrances, adorned with towers. It stands on a high plinth occupying 370 feet east-west and 170 feet north-west. The chief entrance- Mahadwara with a flight of twelve steps faces east and is called the Namdevgat, named after a great thirteenth century saint, a close friend of the illustrious Jnaneswar. The front part of the first and second steps are covered with brass plates carved with fourteen human figures representing the members of Namdev's family. The first figure holding tambourine in hand is that of Namadev.

The story goes that Namdev attained Samadhi here, and soon after hearing this news, all the fourteen members of the family drowned themselves in the river. Ah! affection thou knoweth no bounds! Could imagination ever touch the marks of demarcation? Visitors offer prayers to the samadhi first. Odd it sounds that Namdev prayed to Vithal to permit him to be at the bottom step to be sanctified by the dust of bhaktas, while entering the temple. Another object of worship at the gate is a niche, housing a two by one and half a foot broad stone, representing Chokha Mela, an outcaste devotee. Before the temple entry Act for Harijans was passed, all the forbidden communities were offering prayers at this niche only. And beyond this point, they were not allowed.

Crossing the Namdev gate, we enter a roofed passage with Nagarkhana on it. It has three rooms on either side, housing images a like Ganeshe etc. This is called Mukti Mandap. Ascending half a dozen steps again, we enter a spacious quadrangle with aisles used for cooking. It contains two samadhis of great saints besides the images of Hanuman and Garuda. Next comes the big mandap with well decorated gates. On either side of the middle gate lie the Dwarapalakas-Jaya-Vijaya. There are images-one of Ganesh and the other is that of Saraswati, holding the lotus, akshamala,

parsu and book in hands. The central gate opens into Solakhamba mantap - a big hall with 16 pillars. The ceiling is beautified with scenes from the scriptures, like Krishnalila etc. There are a number of cells containing the images of Kasi Viswanath, Kalabhaviar, Rama-lakshman, Dattatreya etc. There is a holy pillar called Garuda stambha here and pilgrims embrace it after making money offerings. Next to it lies Choukamba with elephant gate leading to the garbha griha. The archamurthi lies on a four feet high pedestal. The exterior of garbha griha is decorated with Maratha motifs of niches and minarets with stucco figures in the niches. The images of Narasimha, Radhakrishna, Vishnu adorn the niches in the walls and they are grand.

RUKHMINI MANDIR

The temple for Rukhmini is situated in the north west corner of the garbha griha. It has an antarala, mandap, sabhamandap etc. fittingly decorated and neatly maintained. The three-foot high image of Rakhumai is installed on high a pedestal with a silver plated prabhavala behind. She is decorated in Marati style with dazzling diamond jewels and shimmering sarree. Her enchanting form and stature draped in colourful dress and jewels casts an enchantment on the beholders. There are separate shrines for Satyabhama and Rati built in a grandiose manner. There lie many minishrines and niches adorned with several gods and goddesses in the enclosure, occupying vast area. The spacious hall with its spic and span detain the devotees, and spending hours affords a rewarding experience.

THE ARCHAMURTHI

The archamurthi is called by many names such as Vithoba, Panduranga, Vithal, Krishna etc and each has its story. Vithoba means father of Vithala. Vithala is derived from the Kannada word Vitta, standing for Krishna. It means also one who receives for

giving grace to those without (tha), knowledge (vit), by splitting it into three component parts like Vit+tha+la. Pandurang is the sanskritised form of Pandarga, the old name of Pandarpur, reminiscent of Pundalik, whose association made this kshetra Pundarika pura. The image of this august panduranga is about three and a half feet in height and is installed on a four foot high pedestal. The image has two arms adorned with sankh in left hand and lotus stem in the right hand but resting on the hips. It is beautified with Kausthubhamala around the neck, Vastalanchan on the chest, makarakundalas in the ears and a head-gear ornamented with a Sivalinga in the middle. It is standing on a square block offered to him by Pundalik as asana. It is exceedingly enchanting with colourful garlands and the characteristic akimbo pose. A single darsan elevates and it remains for ever, locked up in mind.

PUJAS AND FESTIVALS

The routine worship is offered at five times a day. It begins with Kakadarati followed panchamruta puja. Afternoon worship consists of Naivedya. Dheepaarati is the next pooja and the last one is Shejarati. Elaborate rituals with hymns and songs to the accompaniment of music are observed with great fervour. Besides there are several periodical and occasional festivals like Panchamrita snana on wednesdays and saturdays. Every Ekadasi is a special occasion; Gokulashtami, the birth day of Krishna is celebrated with great pomp, when huge crowds overflow the banks and streets of this holy town. Ashada and Karthika masas also have great pull. The worship is carried on according to agamic injunctions by competent graded officials consisting of Badavas, Utpats, Pujaris, Benaris - hymnists, Paricharikas - bathmen, Haridasas - singers, Dingres - barbers, Danges - mase bearers, and Divetis - light men. The Badavas command great respect and occupy first place in the main temple and Utpats likewise in the Rukmini temple. A harmonious blend of Marathi and Kannada traditions are followed and they are being practised with great devotion

THE VARKARIS AND THEIR ROLE

No account of the temple becomes complete, if it excludes the Varkari Sampradaya. The Varkari panth occupies a much coveted place here. He plays a significant role in all the devotional activities of the temple. The institution acquired such high reputation that Vithal and Varkari have become one and the same and they bear no separation; one reminds the other and each exists for the other. The Varkari is a picturesque figure and assumes a peculiar aspect, when he enters the temple in his simple but special dress of dhoti and shirt with a turban on head, holding small cymbals in his hand and carrying a saffron flag. His services during the Palanquin procession are indispensable and they heighten its glory by adding colour and piety to the function. He indispensably attends the Ashada and Karthika masa festivals and propagates the bhakti cult through song and bhajan. For him, Panduranga Vithal is all, and above all in his earthly sojourn. He is not a sanyasin, and so lives in society and carries on his profession with a difference. He is initiated into the panth by a guru and wears a tulasi bead-rosary for meditation. It is only an outward symbol, enabling him to perform pilgrimages to the temple. By and large, it is admitted by all, the fame of the temple spread far and wide by this Varkari Sampradaya. ❀

contd from P 17

After Independence, to be precise, after the demise of Bapu, it became a much venerated pilgrimage centre for hero worship of unprecedented reputation. Among the places worth visiting there, Adi Nivas comes first. Incidentally it was built first, keeping in mind Bapu's taste and way of living. It is here, he lived with Mata Kashiriba along with some important intimates of the asram. It is here National leaders sought him and received messages from time to time. As it could not meet the ever expanding activities, Bapu moved to Bapu kutir, built by Miraben, with her own hands a foreign disciple of great name. Spinning on the charka by inmates was carried on here everyday for an hour and half regularly. Another kutir called Pa kutir lying between Bapu Kutir and Adi Nivas was built by Jamanlal Bajaj for Kasturiba. Yet one more called Aakri Nivas was the place, where Gandhiji lived before Independence. Along with these, the prayer ground-a simple open ground beckons attention, where prayers of all Faiths were held early mornings at 4.20 A.M. evenings at 6 P.M. by all. This sacred custom is honoured even today. Lastly, Pauner Asram, where the Bhoodan leader Vinoba lived is adjacent to this, and is a miss-not spot. Along with these, Parandham asram, Bharat Ram Mandir, Paunar-hhatri, Gandhi Srambh deserve visitation for spiritual bliss.

MOTHER BHAVANI OF TULJAPUR

UNIQUENESS

Is "roudra" justifiable? Is it the right means to stamp out the fire of injustice? Does it quell the crisis? What place does it occupy in the Navarasas? Can it admit universal application? What are its limitations? For explication correct and interpretation precise, approach Mother Bhavani of Tuljapur and put these one after another watching her reactions as the question session progresses. Sure the enlightenment that dawns makes the questioner another Buddha and sets him out anon to sermonising its efficacy. For, the Mother is renowned for subjectivity and has been revealing the myraid forms of roudra by tapping at it periodically to set right the erring brains and voluble tongues. Both legends and history are treasuring up an innumerable accounts of her assuming 'roudraswarupa' and asserting herself to meet the situations of disaster either by her aerial voice, or through the lieutenants of unprecedented mettle, and succeeded with master strategy with or without battle against the ruthless iconoclasts and remorseless expansionists. This Mother Bhavani changed scores of commonplace kind of men into celebrated rulers, who founded glorious kingdoms, established marvellous traditions, demonstrated spectacular physical power and preserved age-old hoary culture. She turned herself into rudraswarupini times umpteen to prove that abstinate perversity must be met with adamantine wrath; despicable bigotry, could be milled to powder with callous bigotry, and sadistic brutality must be made to bite dust with intractable stubbornness, aided by many more allied traits; and finally justifies that virtuous wrath alone offers right solution and can silence once for all injustice. And as such, it holds as much exalted status as that of

any other in the navarasas. It sees not distinctions of sex, nor confined to place, nor abides by the restriction of time. End justifies means under certain extra-ordinary conditions, though Santarasa is preferable to roudra.

Mother Bhavani, the personification of ferocious wrath taking her abode in the hill temple of Tuljapur is jagrit - living deity and is ever alert to taking reprisal against the offenders. She tolerates not injustice meted out to any, by any, at any time and in any place. Legends embody numerous accounts of her taking revenge upon the iconoclasts and wicked invaders through her human agency. This mother animated the ordinary, sublime, simple men into roaring lions by igniting virtuous wrath embedded in their hearts and became instrumental in founding empires. Is it her permanent aspect? Not at all. She is Kamadhenu too. She is the family deity of almost all the Maharastrians and was the first among the adorable Sakti devatas to receiving honours from her votaries. The Peshwas for example, did nothing without visiting this Sakti Pitha and praying for inspiration and benediction. Although there are many Saktipithas in the land of Maharashtra, like Mahalakshmi of Kolhapur, Mahamaya Renuka at Mahur, Jagadamba at Saptshrung and Ambejogai at Osmanabad, this Bhavani is popular as a powerful Goddess who ignites herosim in men and advocates righteous indignation in dealing with savages in royal robes, and blood - suckers on the saddle with torch in one hand and sword in another. The temple built on the Yamunachala by Viswakarma at the behest of Brahma according to legends has several unique features that bid instant visitation; for, it is this Jaganmata who has been staying here at the instance of an ardent devotee Anubhuti by name in the dim past; it is this Mother who played a dominant role to keep aloft the Maharashtra banner; it is for this Bhavani, Brahma commissioned Viswakarma to build a shrine; it is for this Mother, the Kallola thirtha - the repository of the waters of all the rivers in the Punya Bharat was created; it is this Mata that metamorphosed a homely lad into an empire builder of universal recognition; it is this Mother that has the unique habit of going to sleep thrice a year, when special prayer services are

suspended in the main temple; it is this Mother who played chess with the pious Mahant daily; it is this Mother who assumed the fiercest form to kill a demon called Matang; it is this Mother's image that was smashed to powder by the Muslim bigot Afzal khan; it is this temple that enshrines a big boulder sanctified by the sitting of Sri Rama - Lakshmana during their search for the abducted Sita; it is to this temple's famous Dharathirth, waters of Ganga Yamuna and Saraswati flow down; and it is this temple that set up the practice of offering of breakfast to the Mother in the morning before the ritualistic offer of Naivedya.

Renowned in the legend and history; patronised by illustrious rulers; worshipped as the Kulaswamini of the entire Marathi race; eulogised by saint poets and chronicles; admired by Brahma, served by Viswakarma and Punya thirthas; and adored by the warrior clan, this Jaganmatha Bhavani is luring a steady influx of pilgrims of all nationalities since the Krita yuga.

ANTIQUITY

The principal works delineating the glorious history of this kshetra embody several episodes; they account for the advent of Mother to this place and her playing several sports for emancipating people and the country. Only two can be singled out now, and they serve the purpose well.

THE MATANGA EPISODE

The story goes that there was an asura here by name Matanga reigning supreme and causing untold suffering to the people, particularly the sages and innocent. He was atrocious and unscrupulous-slaughtered the peace-loving, harmless subjects; abducted several fair women for quenching his kamadaha; looted the rich to feed his coffers; burnt asramas, destroyed temples, butchered cows and desecrated yagnasalas to gratifying his athiestic aggressive nature. Were the suras spared? No. His asura

pravirthi asserting itself caused incalculable harm to all in several ways. When things went beyond the stage of toleration, the devas and humans met Brahma and poured out their pathetic fate with streaming eyes. The Pitamaha, giving a patient hearing sympathised with their affliction, but expressed his inability to destroy him. Consoling sincerely, he advised them to approach Mother Amba. Directing the steps to her abode, they repeated their woeful tale. Moved visibly, She assured instant action. Sending them out, she emerged assuming the fiercest form with roudra exuding from her blood shot eyes and vengeance dripping from every pore of her fluttering frame, and entered the war field. Matanga was shocked to see such form, but being wicked and resourceful directed his armies against her. His asurasakti when asserted to the fullest extent, Mother felt jolted for a while. Then she summoned her powerful saktis like Varahi, Brahmi, Vaishnavi, Kumari, Indrani, Sambhavi, and with their strength she fell on the demon with unparalleled ferocity. Their united strength and unyielding tenacity at last scored victory over Matanga, who although proved more than a match in his strategy fell dead. Grateful people offered prayers and praised her valorous action in song. Heaving a sigh of relief, they enjoyed carefree life thenceforward. As Matanga was killed, it was a clean, grand victory to Amba; and so she was henceforth called Matangi. She is worshipped in a splendid shrine called the Bhavani temple. And for the advent of Bhavani to this place and making this an permanent abode in response to the desire of a devout brahmin lady, there is another fascinating story.

THE ANUBHUTI EPISODE

It begins - there lived a pious brahmin by name Kardam in the Kritya yuga, known for his mastery over ancient lore. He was an ideal brahmin who lived for learning and teaching the hoary culture. He had an ideal partner in his loving wife called Anubhuti. They were inseparable like Uma and Maheswar. An ideal woman as she was, she gave bliss to him by her devotion and chaste life. And a son too. But their union did not last longer. Kardam met

with a premature death, leaving his young wife and infant boy. The grief-stricken wife decided for the Sati-the customary rite of burning on the funeral pyre. Just before her entering the blazing fire, an aerial voice forbade the action on the ground that she had to bring up the infant boy, as there was none to look after him. Bowing to the voice, she bestowed undivided attention on the education of her son; yet her thought of reaching her husband in heaven did not leave her. It haunted, rather clung to her like the shadow. The boy blossomed into a young man and resembled his father in all. Was not he the product of the specimen couple with exemplary life?

Equipping him with everything necessary for his worldly life and convincing him with her long cherished ambition, she entered the final asram - Vanaprasthasram. Snapping all connections with kith and kin, she went to Meruparvatha for meditation. She did penance for long, and just at a time when her longing for moksha was about to be consummated, a king by name Kukoor appeared on the scene and upset the normal tenor. This earth and earthy Kukoor was lusty and licentious - a voluptuous beast, besides hunting mild beasts in the forest. Chancing to see her alone in the asram, while on his hunting expedition, he was drawn to her. Her captivating beauty roused in him amorous instincts and so desired to own her for appeasing his sensuality. He went near and proposed to marry her. As she was deep in meditation, nothing entered her mind, nor could she relish such heinous act. So Kukoor resorted to physical force. When he was about to lift her for abduction, Anubhuti let out heart-rending cry in such a high pitch that it reached Mother Bhavani. Then descended there anon Tvarita, another name for the Mother to protect the chaste Anubhuti from the clutches of impestuous immoral Kukoor. The asura was taken aghast as he never expected such a scene in a dense forest, in a lone hermitage at it. Seeing the Mother, the imbecile egoistic asura entered the fray with his powerful army, presuming that a single lady could not save another lady in distress, but he failed in his estimation. The Mother too pressed into service the bhutaganas and yogins. The war went on for long since the

asura taking several dreadful forms fought and destroyed almost all the ganas. The time came. Seeing him assumed the form of buffalo, she bounced upon him and caught hold of his head and delivered a death blow with her potent sword. That lusty beast in his buffalo form fell down dead like a sack of bones and flesh. The ganas hailed the Mother and celebrated her triumph. Dharma never brooks any defeat! Chastity never loses its chastity!! Will the salt lose its savour? Relieved Anubhuti then prayed to the Mother fervently to bless her and the people by taking her permanent seat in this loka at the same spot. Mother Bhavani enraptured by the exotic beauty of Yamunachala and the surrounding Nature in the prime of her beauty with colour and sound ever flowing, said 'Yes'. Thus the Yamunachala, a lovely spot on the slopes of Sahyadri mountain became the earthly seat of Mother Bhavani, who through several other auspicious names like Tvarita, Tulaja, Amba, Turaja is worshipped ardently by the people of all classes seeing in her the predominance roudra in her fierce aspect, yet the most compassionate in fulfilling their desires. No soulful petition was ever turned down, nor her votaries preferred other deities once they come to her feet and take refuge in her. As her miracles went on increasing with the passage of time, her fame rose sky high and turned her in course of time the most reliable deity for progress and peace.

HISTORICITY

From the inscriptional and iconographical evidence, it can be adduced that this Rudraswarupini was left to herself to safeguard her own position and glory during the Muslim conquest of the south, unlike the fortunate Mahalakshmi of Kolhapur, Pandurang Vittal of Pandarpur etc. who laid hidden in the dark hovels of the ardent devotees and were installed later with grandeur unheard of! Added to this discomfiture, as it were, the invader Afzal Khan, knowing that Mother Bhavani was the family deity of his arch enemy Shivaji ordered at once to raze the temple to the ground and the image to be smashed to millions of pieces

and powdered in a quern; but to what effect? Alas! he was paid in his own coin. For, the Mother prophesied his end in three weeks in a resonant aerial voice that reverberated the whole Sahyadri Hills. Yes in a fortnight's time that remorseless bigot joined the dust, decomposed and disintegrated to the dishonour of the whole clan of iconoclasts. This incident took place in 1659, when Adil Shahi of Bijapur sent general Afzal Khan, his commander to capture Shivaji, who proudly boasted that he would take Shivaji to the capital, dead or alive before the end of his campaign. With Mother Bhavani's infinite grace, Shivaji killed the arrogant prattler in a fortnight's time. Mother Bhavani's aerial voice was thus fulfilled and along with that Maharastra banner started fluttering, and sounded to the Muslim kings the tolling of death knell, as it were. Government records embody certain references to the glory of the temple, when certain Maratha leaders of Bhonsales made grants to the temple, wherein Mother Bhavani was mentioned as their Kulaswamini. Another notable feature that can be discerned from the records is that these sanads were made on the fulfilment of vows - Navasas taken by the rulers. On occasions when certain rulers bypassed the Mother, relying upon their muscle power, they were severely punished - defeated in the skirmishes against Muslim adversaries. Not only did the Mother rain boons for the success of her votaries, but punished them, pointing out their lapses arisen due to either their over confidence or arrogance, when they reached her feet. They then made lavish endowments in token of realisation.

Mother Bhavani thus kept the scales even and justified that 'roudra' is as indispensable as Vatsalya. Here is evidence. Some of the young chicks among the Maharastra leaders invoked the aid of gods other than Bhavani, though she was their family deity and helped them before on several occasions. Result: They were totally routed out, when Ahmad Shah Abdali challenged their supremacy. So Mother Bhavani is believed as Jagrit - living goddess dispensing justice timely and justly. As the Kulaswamini, she corrected the votaries in assuming the forms of Rudraswarupini and Karunaswarupini too according to the situation. Archives

embody this truth. The earliest mention of this temple is made in the copper plates belonging to the year 1204 AD. Next in 1398, another grant to the temple was made by devotees on fulfilment of desires. All these sanads help to reconstruct the history of the temple with exact dates, from the thirteenth century onwards but legendary accounts push the date back to the Kritayuga with Brahma's participation in the building of temple etc. and creating of the ponds for the benefit of the deity and the visiting devotees.

THE TEMPLE

This is a hill temple built on the Yamunachala, one of the slopes of Bala ghat, an integral part of the Sahyadri. As it lies on the deep slope, the visitors have to descend to reach the Mother's feet from the Mahadwara, lying at a higher level. Does not this descent signify that however great ~~one~~ may be, he has to step down from his pedestal and reach her feet with humility? What is ~~man~~ after all before the powers infinitude of that Universal Mother, the ~~cause~~ of cosmos and ruler of the worlds? After a descent of about 15 feet, the visitor finds a big tank called Kollola thirtha. It has an awe-some story.

THE KOLLALA THIRTHA

According to legend, this temple was built by Viswakarma at the behest of Brahma. After completion, Brahma made this kshetra holiest by bringing the waters of the holier rivers for the holy dip by the bhaktas to purge of sins. So he summoned all the rivers of the Bharat without exception to come through under ground and join the kund, dug there. They did as bid. They came in great haste and collected there with unprecedented tumult; seeing their jubilant furore, Lord Brahma named the thirtha as Kallola thirtha - an appropriate ~~name~~. On account of the merging of all the sacred waters, their efficacy is such that they have curative and purificatory powers. A dip emancipates, particularly

in the Maghamasa. Visitors invariably take bath and observe rites as guided by the priests there.

After this point, there is a further descent of another 15 feet that takes into the second prakara. Here in addition to thrithas, there are many shrines and mandaps for several deities. Among the thirthas, the Gomukh Thirtha deserves mention. From the stone image of a cow's head, lying at a height of six feet, water flows down constantly coming from the Mankavati thirtha lying far off. It goes by the name of Dhara thirtha supposed to contain the waters of the Ganga, Yamuna and Saraswathi. They are some more like Amrit thirtha, Ganesh thirtha etc. The precincts and the kunds are perfectly tidy and at each there are priests called Upadhyaas stationed to guiding the bathers with rituals. On the banks of these thirthas there are many mini-shrines housing the adorable images of Dattatraya, Vittal, Vinayak etc. Crossing this, the visitors find several shops selling puja materials, like kumkum, haldi etc. Leaving them when proceeded further, the visitors enter the three phased prakara. Here they see vast courtyards with pillared aisles on all sides. The main shrine faces the east and has four separate mandaps. Siddheswar Mahadev is enshrined in the eastern most part and next to it has a square shaped Sabhamandap with three entrances; and from here alone the visitors avail the darsan of the principal deity. Devotees who make offerings are allowed to go further and they alone can have a close look at the image. Adjacent to this lies the central mandap. The garbha griha is square shaped and is surmounted by a superb stucco sikhar. The architectural design and sculptural adornments attract the devotees. There are many worth-seeing images of several deities adorning the niches in the aisles around the main shrine. The statues of deities like Khandoba, Narasimha, Yami, Lakshmi Narayana beckon attention and adoration. The temple of Matangi Devi, one of the manifestations of Mother Bhavani is situated in the north east corner and this is equally beautiful and visit-worthy. Devotees offer prayers here also with equal fervour.

THE ARCHAMURTHI

The three-foot-high granite image of the Mother is grand to look at, and she reveals with eight arms holding weapons, like trident, dagger, arrow and chakra in right lower and upper hands; and sankh, bow, bowl and the head of Mahishasur in the left upper and lower hands. She is in standing posture with right leg on the head of asur and the left leg on the pedestal with her mount Simha behind. It is here found the image of Anubhuti in meditation pose with head down. The Mother with dazzling diamond jewels and colourful robes together with grand garlands looks extremely beautiful and wrings veneration. It is a sight to see and that experience lives in memory for ever. It haunts by flashing across the minds again and again even after years of visitation. As the Mother is deemed to be Jagriti, Sakama bhakti is prevalent. When the desires are fulfilled, devotees pour in their money to redeem the vows taken, along with several kinds of rich offerings. Among them, filling the lap of the Mother, shearing the locks of hair, offering of garments etc. are very common and popular. And in the past slaughtering of animals and drinking of liquor were in vogue; thanks to the reforms, the authorities stopped all those abnoxious practices and switched over to Satwika puja. Hence its popularity is waxing, as modernity with sublime piety has introduced through several traditions in the spirit of changing trends. And permissible to all sections of people.

THE GHAT-SHILA

Another miss not spot here is the Ghat-Shila. It is associated with Sri Rama's life and hence visit-worthy. It appears that Mother Bhavani took fancy to test Sri Rama's monogamy - Ekapatni vratadiksha, while he was moving in this place, searching for Sita. So she approached him disguised as Sita. Sooner than seeing her, Sri Rama knelt before and asked for blessings. The crest-fallen Mother Bhavani owning defeat, played host to the brothers and promised help. Later, to mark the event and to perpetuate the

memory of their visit, they were asked to instal two Siva lingas here and they are now worshipped as Ramcswar linga and Lakshmaneswarlinga. The spot of their meeting as deemed holy and held sacrosanct. Hence the craze on the part of this visitors, who miss not this spot however short their stay may be.

PUJAS AND FESTIVALS

One can observe certain odd traditions prevalent here in the performance of regular and occasional pujas to the Mother. Their novelty fascinates and elevates, if the probe is made and learnt the reason. As it is practised elsewhere, the deity is worshipped at four times - the first begins early in the morning with the wiping of the Mother's feet and face with wet cloth. The wet cloth then is squeezed to the last drop, and the water collected thus is given as the holy thirtha. An oddity. Then follows the offering of bread and vegetables as the dishes for breakfast. With this the first puja is over. Another oddity! And a unique feature that surprises the visitors. The afternoon pooja is called Shodasopachari. It is offered with elaborate rites, and closes with Mahanaivedya. In the evenings, arati with incense forms the main feature, followed by Prakshalana puja. Everytime after the worship, the Mother is adorned with glittering ornaments and shimmering robes. The sight detains and enthrals the beholders. Apart from these some occasional poojas are performed and they are called Gudi Padva in Chaitra masa, Shriral Shasti in Shravan, Lalita Panchami in Ashvin, Bali pratipada in Kartika, Makara Sankranti in Pausha, and Ratasaptami in Magha. And they are grand. Thousands of persons participate in them jubilantly spending huge sums of money on decorations etc. Another one by name Chabina or procession is very common. The palanquin is taken out on Tuesdays. During Navaratri festival, the Utsavamurthi is taken in the ambari, borne by some vahana. Special categories of people called Bhutas and Gondhalis lend charm by singing songs-vocal and instrumental. The Vijayadasami during Navaratri is the biggest draw and the whole campurs reverbating with music reach the worlds above. And the

illumination makes the Sahyadri hills dazzle exceeding that of the Rajitaparvatha of Lord Siva.

THE MOTHER'S SLEEP

Another unique feature is the special puja offered to the Mother after waking up; it occurs thrice a year. The Mother is put to sleep in the central Mandapa in a special chamber, where a separate bedstead is installed. Though she sleeps for certain days at a stretch on three occasions, the regular poojas are conducted in the shrine unhindered. What a novelty! Such oddities indeed evoke surprises in the visitors, but for the regular Maharastrian devotees they are very common and hasten them to her Sannidhi to availing special rituals conducted then. May be due to attending to infinite number of spiritual and secular duties she gets exhausted and to recouping the lost, she sleeps soundly only on three occasions, but she is ever alert and vigilant throughout the period. This uniqueness is properly highlighted with special rituals due. Moreover, this Kulaswamini of great fame has a preference for the game of chequers, which she plays with the Mahant of the temple. How queer! On one occasion, when she delayed in returning to her seat for receiving regular prayers, there was great furore. Then reciprocal recriminations between the two - preists and the MOTHER ensued. So a new tradition was established to announce the time of pujas to making her presence in the seat without fail. This temple maintains some monasteries, and the heads of the Maths are called Mahants. Their presence enhanced the glory of the temple; for, the appointed heads were great devotees and brought in several innovations in administration and performance of pujas. With many such oddities, the temple is growing in glory and piety. ❀

BHAGAWAN PARASURAM OF PHEDE

UNIQUENESS:

Bhagawan Parasuram is a unique phenomenon; a multi-dimensional personality, a mobile versatility, a sacred institution and a rare ascetic invested with myriad splendours. And many more! In fine, He is much feared than loved. A mere glance accelerates our pace for instant darsan. So look! Parasurama is the fifth incarnation of Lord Srimannarayana, born to stamp out adharma and establish Dharma Devatha in her rightful place. He is the youngest of the five children of that illustrious Jamadagni, one of the Saptarishis, and Renuka - a woman of impeccable chastity. So he shared both Sathwika and Rajasika qualities - a compound of opposites, as a matter of fact. He combined in himself a queer mixture of intense extremes that manifested themselves in his mental make up and functional attitudes. He is ferocious and solicitous, both in their intensity at it. With regard to expression of filial piety, retaliatory ferocity, humane religiosity, unexceptional tenacity, he has neither superiors, nor peers. He is second to none but to himself. In whatever he did or thought, there emerged something extraordinary that stands out either for warning or example. His life is an example of great struggle not for self advancement but for universal good - Jagatkalyana. Wherever he laid his hand, it received a Midas touch and turned immortal like its benefactor, who is a Chiranjivi. He won battles and conquered the whole land by his kshatric prowess, but gifted away all to Kasyap. He built bhagavannilayas in scores of places and spiritualised the ignorant drifting into atheism. He did penance for worldly achievement and is doing still to realising the ideal - 'Sarve samastha sukhino bhavanthu'. Aren't these

enough to set him apart from the rest of the incarnations? Isn't he a phenomenon unique? Did any incarnation possess such versatility? Has the posterity proved worthy of his ideal, or grown to that stature of his of expectation? These questions demand a probe deep and comprehension thorough.

HIS BIRTH AND EDUCATION

Parasurama's incarnation has a fitting setting - an illustrious Maharshi-Jamadagni for father, and equally illustrious brahmin turned kshatria Renuka, daughter of Prasenajit of the Ikshavaku clan for mother. And the heart of mother Nature for his dwelling. A product of inimitable austerity and impeccable chastity. So his possessing the traits diametrically opposite with each another and that won for him the whole of Bharat Khand which he gifted away, reserving nothing except a Kamandal etc. When came of age, he mastered all the branches of knowledge and blossomed into a model son of a model father. Though acquired proficiency in the Vedic sastras, he had a special preference for astras. He went to Gandhamadhana mountain, propitiating the Lord of Kailas he did intense tapa. Lord Siva, pleased with his austere life gave as many astras he desired along with the formidable battle axe - Parasu. Granting all, Lord Siva arranged for a mock battle with him to test his powers. It was a stiff fight and in the end the pupil emerged victorious after really delivering a death blow on his master's forehead with his parasu. Greatly gratified, the All-compassionate Siva taking it humorously called himself 'Khanda Parasu'.

HIS PITRU BHAKTHI

Returning home after obtaining the more coveted astras, he had a problem to face, but here again his superior mettle won for him unprecedented appreciation. Jamadagni enraged at Renuka's delay in reaching house with water pot, due to her witnessing of the Jalakrida of King Chitrarata, ordered his four sons one after

another to behead her. But none accepted, deeming the father's action was unjust. When Parasurama was bidden, he did sever her head without any second thought; for, he knew that father being earthly god should always be obeyed implicitly. Delighted at his pithrubhakti, he asked him to name any boon. Parasuram at once asked for the revival of his mother with taposakti. It was granted anon. So, he scored victory over his father. His matrubbhakti too was unequalled though it appears, his paternal love weighed heavier than maternal. Wasn't he a compound of extremes? Intensity marked everyone of his actions, and it virtually propelled him into action - terrific or pacific.

HIS ROLE AS WARRIOR

During this period, another facet came to light; it was the most dreadful and also fulfilled the purpose of his incarnation. There lived in the Narmada valley a king by name Kartavirya belonging to Haihaya dynasty, famous as Sahasrarjuna. Being blessed by Dattatreya with thousand arms, he embarked upon digvijayayatra and conquered many kings. He did not limit his greed with the conquest of kshatrias, but stretched it further and proved a veritable yama to rishis by destroying hermitages and the like, for his mere sadistic delight. When Vasistha's asram was razed, Vasistha cursed that soon his thousand arms would be cut off. He challenged the sea, as all the kings were subdued by then. But the sea politely withdrew saying that he would find soon a match in war. It was at this juncture Kartavirya's sons bloated with the pride of father's conquests, seized by force the Kamadhenu from Jamadagni's asram. Parasuram asserted and entered into the warfield. Kartavirya though displayed his extraordinary powers, self-acquired and god-given he could not stand against Parasurama's invincible powers. He bit the dust and returned the Kamadhenu. But his surviving sons wreaked vengeance on Jamadagni by killing him in his asram during Parasurama's absence. Assuming rudrarupa, he entered the kingdom of Haihaya, brandishing his dazzling parasu and destroyed the enemy single -

handed. Kartavirya and his sons died on the field. As his mother by then expired at the death of her Lord Jamadagni, he thought to wipe out the entire kshatria race. He mercilessly massacred almost all the kshatrias he could find; for, many of them went into hiding at his approach. He continued for long, but some elderly sages dissuaded him from that drastic line of action. Heeding their bidding he stopped further conquests.

HIS ROLE AS GURU

Being versatile and indomitable by nature, he started Gurukulam deeming the profession best and began teaching astra vidya. Soon celebrated disciples came out with unprecedented skill in war. The redoubtable Bhishma Pitamaha and prestigious acharya Drona, and the star crossed Maharathi Karna were only a few who received his training. Here too, his uniqueness was exhibited when Karna concealed his caste, and he cursed him badly.

HIS CONQUESTS AND SACRIFICE

In the mean while, of course, after centuries of his taking up the role of preceptor, there came a challenge from an arrogant king that Parasuram was a hollow boaster and unable to conquer the kshatrias, and frightened by their numerical strength, he took to teaching. This provocation was too much to bear and his warlike temper woke up and once again he undertook his conquest of kshatrias. None survived, when confronted many hid themselves in antahpuris. The kings of Anga, Kalinga, Malava, Videha, Kashmir, Kunti, Sabhi fell at his feet resulting in the Urvitala-face of the earth becoming nirvira - without fighter. As he got, he gifted away all. At the request of his Pitrudevatas coming from heaven, he retired from further contest. He then performed a great sacrifice with the famous Kashyapa as the chief priest, and at the end he gave away the conquered Bharat as 'dan', saying that he would go

to Mahendra mountain for taking up his ascetic life. He excelled the unexcelled excellences in everything.

HIS WORK IN KERALA

Though resumed his ascetic life again, he was ministering to the needs of people in several ways. Even the incarnated too received his aid and held him in high esteem. In the Tretayuga, he gave away his astras to Sri Rama for use against Dasakantha, and in the Dwaparayuga he met Balarama and Srikrishna during their skirmishes against Jarasanda and helped them to defeat their powerful enemy through giriuddha. After the Kurukshetra war, he settled down on the Sahyagiri permanently. In the Kaliyuga his presence and intervention were sought by the ascetics living in the down south to the western part. The sea-king started inundating part by part of the west coast, causing unendurable anguish to the munikula to leading their quite life there. Listening to their tearful tales, he took up his astra and entered the land. The sea king finding his adversary in his most fiercest form accepted to withdraw as far as his arrow went. He released potent arrow, the result was the emergence of the present Kerala State. Reclamation started and ascetics returned, but that region was scarcely populated and was without temples and cultural institutions. He set out then moving across the land and built many temples and brought Veda pandits from the Aryavratha to conducting both regular prayer services and periodical worship. He codified rules and framed regulations for maintaining and administering the regions placed under priests. He supervised and guided them from time to time. Religious and social life bloomed and emitted a special kind of fragrance, characteristic of its author Parasuram. If Kerala achieved some spectacular success and enviable progress in fields of education and religion, it is all due to the contribution of his wealth - spiritual and intellectual. Though right from the northern most point of Sahyadri in Maharashtra to the southern most Kanyakumari bears the stamp of his powerful personality, only Kerala is enjoying a larger chunk of his grace. A part of Konkan

and the entire state of Kerala was the major beneficiaries and they lay claims to his legendary heritage with commendable pride. Kerala erected many temples and several outstanding monuments to perpetuate his memory and they are scattered all over the state. They immortalised his memory by introducing Parasurama saka naming after this great pioneer.

THE MAHARASTRA CONTRIBUTION

Many of the places in Maharashtra are associated with Parasurama. Though his birth, education, exploits, conquests took place in this region, he is not so popular, say ardently adored as the other deities like Vithoba, Khandoba, Bhavani etc. May be due to his settlement after giving the conquered land to Kashyap. Yet there is one temple exclusively dedicated to him. And strangely enough it was built by a Muslim woman in token of her gratitude for the benefit received. Sounds odd, isn't it? Nay it is quite in consonance with his equally odd character. Wasn't he catholic in his religious outlook? Did he ever distinguish one from another?

The strangeness sprang up thus-once a Muslim princess belonging to Adilsahi's dynasty despatched a flotilla of merchant ships with valuable cargo to far off Arab countries. Soon news came to her that powerful gales developed in the high seas all on a sudden. Its onset being sudden, and velocity incredible, it was feared that nothing would reach the destination safe - neither cargo nor persons in charge of it. Perturbed greatly she sought the help of Lord Parasuram; for, she heard the story of Parasuram's cowing down of the sea with his mighty bow. She made tearful appeals and offered soulful prayers taking a vow to erect a temple, if nothing untoward happened to the cargo and men. Her sincerity pleased Parasuram most and by a wave of hand he subsided the fury of the sea. When the news of safe reaching of all, she felt extremely joyous and soon spent lakhs to build a decent temple in memory of his benignity that saved her treasure. Gradually, when the strength of adorers increased and receipt of Navas enriched the

temple coffers, expansion programme was undertaken with great fervour. The endowments of the princes and philanthropists too raised it to the level of a primer centre of pilgrimage in the state of Maharashtra. A little bit of history before and after the occurrence of the momentous event is quiet expedient at this stage.

HISTORICITY

Though its distant past cannot be fixed with certainty, the miracles that occurred and circulated among the devotees can be narrated and they are many too. In the dim past it appears, a certain cow used to stand at the exact spot where the present image of Lord Parasurama is installed, and empty its udder - let the milk flow down automatically. This continued for long. The cow herds were amazed and spread the news with unusual fervour. Just at this period, one devotee was informed by Parasurama in dream that he was abiding in that spot. The cowherd's story lent support to the divinity of the place. Popular enthusiasm gained momentum and religiosity took definite shape. A stone was worshipped regularly and it went by the name of Swayambhu. The adorers found their desires fulfilled to their satisfaction. The kshetra became glorious and the deity powerful. Later the Muslim Princess constructed the temple with which its flag started fluttering and bringing in large number of devotees. In the year 1779, one by name Parachura, from Guhaswar installed the images which are being now worshipped. Historical records bear ample evidence through sanads and inscriptions that many peshwas endowed it lavishly. Chatrapati Sivaji visited it and made grants for regular worship.

Of all the persons responsible for its growth and glory, Brahmendra Swami deserves first mention, and his role is memorable. Having visited this area by chance, he found the temple in dilapidated condition. He was a sanyasi, but wielded great powers, as he had large following. His influence on the rulers of Maharashtra was so great that he commanded their soldiers and

coffers too. Utilising the goodwill of the public and power of the rulers, he started renovation work on a gigantic scale. Besides renovating the fallen structures, he caused the building of Sabhamandap, aisles and minishrines. The entire campus was a given a face lift. Chatrapati Sahu, Chinraji Appa helped him in the renovation activity. Unfortunately the Siddis of Janjiru were averse to the growth of Hindu temples. When the aggressive ventures directed against him very often, he left and settled down elsewhere. So, the temple remained closed for a decade. Later, one Shivabhat with the help of Tulaji, a Maharastra admiral secured annual grant for regular worship. A sanad was released authorising the collection of two rupees from each village and it was called Bhargavapatti. When resistance was expressed, then collection of one anna per head in that region was ordered. This too was made optional in 1847 by the Governor of Bombay, when complaints were made to him. But, from time to time repairs and additions were made by devotees as exemplified by the erection of drum house on the gate way. It is only with the income from Navas and cash offerings, the prayer services are being carried on since long.

THE TEMPLE

This is a hill temple lying at a distance of 7 KM from Chiplum. It is built with a large rectangular massive prakara made off brick and stone, pierced by gateways. The eastern gate is the biggest and is adorned with nagarkhana. Crossing the Mahadwara, when entered a vast courtyard surrounding an imposing Sabhamandap, central mandap and Garbagriha greet us. It is built in the Yadava architectural style and grand to look at. The roof is plain, bereft of artistic adornments. The girbha griha is of modest proportions but dark. There on the pedestal are installed three four armed images. Parasurama is flanked by Kala to his right and Kama to the left. The statue of Parasuram is adorned with weapons. The upper right hand holds an arrow, the lower right reveals abhaya mudra, while the upper left a bow and lower left a parasu. It is tall. Its majestic appearance is enhanced by

decorations with jewels and garlands. So, it looks extremely beautiful and wrings veneration.

The association of Kala and Kama is shrouded in mystery. Why that devotee Parachure had brought and enshrined them along with Parasurama, no one knows, nor is recorded in scriptures or of inscriptions, but they are adored along with that august deity. After offering prayers, when we come out, we find a tall Hanuman temple right in front of the main shrine. A moderate sized Ganesh temple lies to the north. It houses a female image called Ganga and receives equal veneration. There is another shrine dedicated to Mother Renuka lying behind the main mandir. A kund called Banaganga, supposed to have been created by Parasuram lies in the court yard supplying water to the temple. Nothing more nor less, the whole campus contains inviting attention for long.

THE PUJA AND FESTIVALS

The routine worship begins at quite early in the morning with the beat of drum, when the image is bathed and offered arati etc. The Dhuparati starts at 8 O' clock with the booming of gun along with the drum. The custom of gun used in the temple is odd, but for a warrior god it certainly adds regality, and heightens his glory. The noon worship with shodasopachara is very important and elaborate rituals are observed. The image in full splendour with grand decorations gives darsan and lifts the souls. The night puja which begins at 8 PM includes the palanquin procession round the shrines is announced by the booming of gun.

Among the periodical festivals, the Parasurama Jayanti called Akshayatritiya is very important and is celebrated on a grand scale with thousands of bhaktas coming from all parts of the state. Distinguished musicians and artistes come from distant places and give performances. Palanquin processions, annadana, discourses etc., are conducted with great eclat. The lalit - a sort of rustic dramatic performance is the star attraction then, and is witnessed

by all though begins in the early hours of dawn after the palanquin procession called Chhabina is over. Ganesh Festival, Sivaratri Festival, the death anniversary of Brahmendra swamy are the other important days in the temple calendar; they entertain the devotees with a wide variety of programmes and hence the lusty participation by thousands. And being the only Parasurama kshetra, its attraction is more and eternal too. As the space in the campus being quite inadequate for huge crowds of visitors, many of them return to Chiplun after worshipping the Bhagawan with ritualistic poojas. Another attraction it holds is, there are no fixed rates for several of the sevas conducted in the temple. Devotees offer their mite in cash or kind to perform sevas. As it is the lone kshetra dedicated to Parasuram, its glory never wanes, nor the Bhagawan withholds the granting of boons and blessings on his adorers. A visit worthy shrine; for shrines for Parasuram are few, though he is recognised as an avatar of Lord Srimannarayan. ■

AMBARNATH

Ambarnath-a holy Saiva Kshetra situated in a lovely valley - a grand colourful spectacle of the Nature's enchanting beauty enjoys a pride of place among the centres of pilgrimage in the state of Maharashtra. Its plus points are many, and position enviable. Its location on the bank of a small river, surrounded by evergreen forests, grown sumptuous on the slopes of high hills has an added attraction to nature-lovers more than theists. The vicinity of two famous cities-Bombay and Kalyan, throbbing with industrial population has catapulted its glory to the pinnacle both as a holy place and a picnic spot. To add to these, it is a specimen of the Konkan style of architecture - a fusion of North and South in form. It illustrates the excellences of Hindu sculpture of the 11th century A.D. It is a shilahara gift to the nation and was built between eighth and ninth centuries. Several royal dynasties like Chalukyas, Shilaharas endowed it in many ways, and it escaped the fury of Portuguese also.

Like any Hindu temple, it has a garbhagriha, porches, pavilions and towers. It faces the west. The towers are richly carved and ornamented lending majesty to the whole construction. The exquisite images carved on pillars, porches and ceiling cast enchantment. The images of Maheshwara, Mardina and Kamadeva in dancing poses are examples of best craftsmanship and the taste of the patrons.

The swayambhu linga - the archamurthi of this famous temple is about two and half a feet in height and is extremely grand to look at. It is adored as Ambareeswar and during the Mahasivaratri day, its glory touches the zenith. This figure Sivalinga resembles the famous Jyotirlinga of Omkara at Mandhata in the Madhya Pradesh. Inscriptions shed enough light on the builders, and it is concluded that it was built in 1060 A.D. by Mamvani, a shilhara Mahamandaleswara of the Konkan region of Maharashtra state. It is a visit-worthy shrine that confers bliss unfathomably and for ever.

LORD KHANDOBA OF JAJURI

UNIQUENESS

"Uddhare atma nathmanam" this Vedic aphorism, besides denoting the efficacy of self help, connotes many covetable traits and covers a wider canvas. It instils in minds several essential virtues that have to be zealously aspired for, assiduously cultivated by and tenaciously held up by one and all. It is applicable to all the living creatures, right from gods down to amoeba, sans exceptions. At all times and in any place too. Though it upholds one's rising by one's own efforts and standing on legs firmly as the best policy and right course under all circumstances, it does neither snap the prop, nor denigrate its past support. Sure, man being a social animal has to indispensably depend on others for coming up in life and making a mark in the world. But not always. The statement that poetry, woman and creeper-kavitha, vanitha and latha do not thrive by themselves, and seek eternal refuge in others is true in parts but not complete. Cent percent. Man's supreme ideal certainly advocates and encourages lending or receiving support now and then, it dissuades clinging on to support permanently, as it tantamounts to servility. One must always rise by his own resources and tap at his inherent potentialities to keep his head erect and move with commendable pride that alone brings credit to his life and makes his living meaningful. Self help - standing on one's own feet adds colour to personality, lends majesty and wins honour even from the inveterate enemy. By and large, it leaves one investing with honour and glamour.

Lord Khandoba, a very popular god of Maharastrians, next to that of Vitoba translates this magic chant into action to teach eternal values to no less than the ruthless bigots like Aurangzeb,

who offering savalaksha gold coins as an act of prayaschitta took to flight, followed soldiers running helter skelter pursued by swarm of honey bees. Instead of giving trouble to the priests and princes He asserted himself and assumed the form of bee. Anon he sent its brood in swarms millions, whose dreadful air-raid proved mightier than armies huge and weapons mighty. Moreover, this god of masses ordained the worship of his own sworn foes along with him i.e., causing their images placed on His either side on the same pedestal - a feature unique, unheard of in the history of mankind. His exhibition of pugnacity is equally matched by the display of magnanimity that has no parallels. The sight of God and Satan on the same pedestal and ordering veneration to be extended equally at the same time is unknown and undreamt of, nor the Mother earth points to another similar place anywhere on her person. And many more special features are abounding in the twin shrines built on the Jayadri, popularly known as Jeguri in the state of Maharastra. These two temples-Karhe-Pather and Gad-kot located near Pune have certain strange customs that reflect the height that devotion can reach, and also hold up the mirror to the abnoxious practices resulting in the creation of Vaghes and Muralis that caused incalculable harm to the society and dishonour to gods. It is these twin temples that are treasuring up the relics of Lord Siva's heroism, along with sad reminders of blind superstition that reigned supreme till recently as exemplified by the existence of poles, chains and hooks used to redeem the navasas. It is this Khandoba who married a grocer's daughter called Mahlsa; it is this Khandoba that blessed Gangabai with the son-Sawai Madhava Rao for which act of benignity the illustrious Maratha leader Nana Phadnavis donated a hundred thousand rupees; it is to this temple, the Holkar family of Indore through Ahalyabai Tukoji etc., made many endowments, besides making to additions to the temple, or renovating the dilapidated portions; it is this temple visited by Chaitanya Prabhu of Bengal, and it is for glorification of this kshetra, scriptures like Jayadri Mahatmya, Marthand Vijaya and Malhari Mahatmya vie with one another in depicting memorable episodes from the life of Lord Khandoba.

ANTIQUITY

Lord Khandoba has several other names like Marthand Bhairav, Mailar Malhari, Ravanath Mhalsakant, Yel koti Mahadev etc., and he created a glittering history that begins in the Vedic times. The glorious role he played to restoring peace in the world after the death of Madhu and Kaitabha began with the birth of Mani and Malla. The story goes that Lord Vishnu rescued once Brahma from the atrocious acts of Madhu and Kaitabha by killing them on his thighs. It is from their corpses Mani and Malla were born, and like their predecessors they wanted to establish full sway over all the worlds. So they performed ghora tapas, propitiating Lord Siva. When he gave darsan to grant boons, they prayed to him, "O Kind Lord grant us power to rule over the universe by defeating all the living beings - surasuras and manavas. We should not be killed by either weapons or chants at any time and anywhere". Lord Siva uttering 'Thadast i' asked earnestly to bestow on him a boon for acting as their destroyer, with a view put to an end to their inhuman ambition and endless greed. Puffed up with over-weening confidence, they said in a non-chalant way - "Yes granted!" That alone brought their miserable end at the hands of Marthand Bhairav, another name for Lord Siva. On obtaining that mighty boon, Mani and Malla launched the campaign of destruction and soon conquered the whole universe. Their wicked dictatorship brought woe to the living beings including gods, as fire and rapine became rampant everywhere. At the instance of Narada, the afflicted went first to Dhevalagiri near the Jeguri Hills and took refuge, but they were not safe there. They met Lord Mahavishnu as advised by Devendra, who taking pity on them expressed his helplessness due to the powerful boons granted by Lord Siva. So he directed them to Lord Siva, their ultimate and sure redeemer. Approaching him they gave a detailed account of the devanakrityas perpetrated by those formidable Rakshasas. The picture of their rapacious rule and the horrors it created moved him. Assuring instant action, he dispersed them.

Without further loss of time, he assumed his Rudraswarupa and commanded his ganas to be rallied under the banner of Subrahmanya along with the entire army of each god. Lord Subrahmanya, the celestial commander-in-chief at once led Devendra, Yama, Nairut, Varuna, Surya, Chandra, Agni and Ganesh to the war field to assist Lord Siva, who assumed the august name of Marthand Bhairav. The terrible battle was fought near Jayadri. The two asuras armed to the teeth, as it were, met the challenge. Armoured with great boons, they proved more than a match to the devaganas. In the course of fierce clash, many fell on both sides. Seeing the victory eluding the grip due to asuramaya, Lord Siva demonstrated his Omnipotence and severed the head of Mani. Just before breathing his last, he prayed that he be associated with the Lord's Marthand Bhairava form. The Lord then sent Lord Vishnu with a message to Malla that he would be spared if taken to instant flight to patala. This infuriated the arrogant Malla and he entered with redoubled energy. Could he blow up the heaven's invincibility? And what then his boon to the Lord? So, he fell although offered a stubborn reinstance for a long time. As a death wish, he prayed to the Lord like his brother that his name and image be associated with the conquerer. Flashing a smile, he sealed it with approval. This accounts for the presence of Mani and Malla icons on the pedestals of the Khandoba's image in temples. The great victory ushered in a blissful peace in the universe. The sages then expressed their supplication to the Lord to stay on the Jayatri Hill itself for ever, enabling them to offer prayers to him. The Omni-compassionate God would never turn down such pious requests of his adorers. Hence his dwelling on the Jayadri. Legend ends there for the history to begin with the construction of temple atop the hill.

HISTORICITY

It is possible to trace the exact date of the emergence of present temples with the help of inscriptional proofs and architectural styles. Tradition confirms the date of its emergence

in 1381 AD, with the munificent donations of one Virpal Virmalla by name. Being an adorer of great fame, he built the garbha griha and other structures for the worship of the Lord, when he was lifted from miseries. Gradually it grew in size and fame, as the glory of the Lord was realised by people. Next mile stone in the history was the visit by Chaitanya Prabhu of Bengal, when the temple attained supremacy as a great kshetra. And the Lord has a preference for true bhakti. In 1635, a devotee by name Ragho Mambaji from Katav caused the construction of the huge Mandap and aisles surrounding the vast courtyards. Later in the eighteenth century many renowned adorers, like Vittal Shivadev, Malhar Rao, Raghuji Patel started construction of many more minishrines and expansion activities, and soon it became one of the premier centres of worship attracting thousands of devotees. In a period of half a century with fits and starts it developed beyond expectation. There are countless inscriptions that deal with the growth of the temple. The arch ways, enclosures came on after another. Mention must be made of the generous contributions and endowments made by the Holkar family from time to time. Rani Ahalyabai and Tukoji top the list of the rich donors. Peshwas too evinced keen interest in making endowments besides deciding the disputes that arose between the parties entrusted with the maintenance of the temple. Decorating of the niches with silver plates and making gold masks for Sivalingas were made by Nana Phadnavis as a part of Navas. Along with several vessels and vahanas, the Peshwas gifted villages for the conduct of regular daily worship together with celebration of periodical festivals. Bhaktas who are blessed with the fulfilment of desires are making donations in several forms. Hence, the all-round development in a short period.

THE APPEARANCE OF KHANDOBA

The appearance of Khandoba in the hill has a fascinating background, and it happened in 1750 AD. It occurred - Strange it appears that once some cowherds resting under the shade of a big tree found a stranger meeting surprisingly and taking a seat

with them. His appearance and manner of moving set them thinking, as who he was and how he came. Just then, the stranger found a devotee by name Bhaya approaching in a flash, he disappeared forthwith. The awe-struck cow-herds told Bhaya of a stranger's strange appearance and disappearance in their midst, when questioned. To his amazement, Bhaya found a Sivalinga of Halad in the exact place where the stranger had sat. Identifying him as Lord Khandoba, he started praying it. The villagers deeming him as a madman threw away the linga. And lo! it returned to the same place appearing extremely brighter than before. Then they realised their folly and accepted its divinity. The next question that confronted them was, with whose devotion it came to stand there. An ingenious method was suggested by someone among them. It was agreed to draw twelve lines on the ground and to strike with pickaxes on them. Honour of bringing Khandoba there, would go to that person whose axe hit the Sivalinga. Needless to say, Bhaya's axe struck, but some strange phenomenon followed. No sooner did the axe touch the linga, there gushed out streams of milk and blood from it. And the flow too was steady and unending. To the wondering folk, Lord Khandoba appearing said that it would stop with the sprinkling of blood on the linga of a man belonging to Royal family. The flow came to an instant stop when the order was implemented. The devotees erected then a temple over the Sivalinga and worshipped it with great ardour. As the Omni-compassionate Khandoba showered boons to the contentment of worshippers, soon it developed into a great temple and they hailed Khandoba as the Pratyaksha Daivam. Many kinds of vows made were redeemed then and there. Priests fixed timings for worship. And rituals and traditions were built up step by step. This is history and evidence available is in abundance that narrates the holiness of this great shrine.

THE TEMPLE

There are two separate shrines dedicated to Lord Khandoba. Both of them are situated on the same range hills and

are lying within a short distance between them; each has a well laid-out road. They go by the names of Karhe-pather and Gad-kot. The Gad-kot temple is built atop the Jayadri Hill and is enclosed by a strong stone wall resembling that of the rampart of a fort. It can be reached by two flights of steps from the foot of the hill. The ascent is tiresome, but is relieved by rows of dipmalas and arches all along the path. The memorial stone slabs bearing the carving of human figures fixed along the way relieve the tedium of the ascent. The first worth-seeing object is a stone with foot prints on. It is believed that here Shivaji met in 1662 AD his father Shahaji after a lapse of one full decade. As the two great Maratha leaders met here, the event was deemed sacred and so held in esteem. Next come two temples dedicated to Bania and Hegadi, who played great roles in temple activities and celebration of festivals.

SAVALAKSHA BHUNGA EPISODE

Near the Mahadwara lies a small niche housing a Sivalinga and it is called Savalaksha Bhunga, meaning thereby that a bee is worth a lakh and a quarter coins. It has a fantastic story and displays Lord Khandoba's glory. It exemplifies the truth that one should defend oneself heroically and dependence of any kind must always be looked down upon. The story begins with Aurangzeb's visit here during his campaign, when he conquered the Daulat Mangal Fort, lying at a short distance to this. Soon after the conquest, it so chanced that he saw the Jejuri fort enclosing the temple. His iconoclast zeal and ambition for expansion at once ignited his greed; so he reached it with army, but found the gates closed. Deciding to blow up the fort, he ordered a hole to be made in the wall for putting dynamite exactly at the place where the Savalaksha Bhunga lies now. Would Khandoba tolerate such sacrilege? Does it not tantamount to his helplessness, if the zealot succeeded? So, he mounted a counter attack in an odd way. There emerged then from the hole honey bees one after another in quick succession. Numberless and timeless. They attacked the soldiers

with great noise, covering the whole person of each soldier. Tried however much, they failed, for their numbers were increasing non-stop. So the bitten battalion, wailing told everything to their leader Aurangzeb. He was confounded and found completely paralised. When guidance from a Hindu soldier was sought for, he replied that Lord Khandoba is a powerful god and is ever vigilant to protect his votaries. He would not spare sacrilege and would avenge in several ways till it was totally wiped out. And added that by appeasing him alone, the trouble would be got over. The listening Moghul at once ordered an offering of a lakh and quarter coins to God. When made, the bees disappeared soon. 'How' did not bother the conquerer, but one thing he knew thoroughly well was, that he was unequalled to that dreadful god, so he bade a disgraceful retreat. Hail Khandoba Mail! Mail!! Mail!!! Sure he tolerates not impaiety, nor tarries in granting the needed by the ardent devotees. Offering soulful prayers to the Sivalinga representing the Lord's eternal vigilance and All-Potent miracles, the visitors move a little to enter the main enclosure. The vast flat ground is covered with stone pavement and there lies in the centre main shrine. The courtyard is surrounded by arched aisles and they are serving as places of rest for weary pilgrims. The massive prakara has three gate ways. The Northern gate with Nagarkhana is the main. The outermost portion of the temple has an arched portico. It houses the famous Khanda - big sword measuring four feet in length and four inches in breadth. It is with this powerful sword he killed his formidable foes. Hence held very sacred. Praying to this, we enter the mandap built in the Yadava architectural style. It houses two big stone horses one with Khandoba scated and the other without a rider. Crossing this, we enter the garbhagriha which has a square 'Devaghar' - a small shrine within a shrine. It enshrines two swayambhu lingas covered with silver plates one standing for Lord Khandoba and the other for his consort Mhalsa. There are also some more pairs of images of Khandoba-Mhalsa here. The image of Khandoba reveals in holding sword, trishula, dhamaru and bowl and that of Mhalsa with lotus buds in her hands. The pair installed in the centre was gifted by Sarfoji Bhosle of Tanjore. Some are silver made, and one is

made of gold too. Behind the statues is seen the figure of Khandoba with his weapons and the figures of jogeshvaris on either side. These are the objects of worship. And offering prayer with rituals, we emerge out. A gigantic size tortoise, called Rangasila measuring 28 feet in diameter greets us. It is used as platform for conducting bhajan and concerts. Straight opposite to this lies a cell used for performing Bagad and the one behind it houses a nine foot high image of demon Mani. The prakara contains some more mini shrines housing Tuljabhavani, Ganesh, Panchalingeswara and so on.

THE KARHE-PATHAR TEMPLE

After praying to them, we proceed to Karhe- Pather lying far off atop the hill but connected by a path with the usual dipmalas and arches on the way. As we proceed, we stop at spot called Ghodeuddan - a sacred spot from where Khandoba jumped to save one of his devotees. It has a story interesting. Tradition says that there was an ardent devotee who visited this temple daily. As he grew old he felt the ascending too difficult, and one day he actually collapsed on the way. Khandoba, the asritaparijata at once rushed to the spot on his white horse and assured him that he would thenceforward dwell on Gad-kot lying lower for his easy worship. So saying he jumped from this spot to reach Gad-kot. The old man hastened to the spot and found two Swayambhu lingas there and began his daily worship with reduced hardship. So practically the Karhe-pather is more ancient than the Gad-kot shrine. After this, we reach Karhe - Pather shrine which is much smaller in size than the one seen. Like its counterpart, it contains a portico, mandap and the garbha griha. Here, the image of Lord Khandoba is installed in a niche on the western wall. It reveals in sitting pose with legs crossed and the hands holding the customary sword, trisula, dhamaru and bowl. It is here on the same pedestal are installed the heads of the demons-Mani and Malla as prayed for. Down below this images lie the two lingas representing the Lord and his consort. As in the Gad-Kot shrine, here also there

is Rangashila used for bhajan programmes and also images of Hanuman, Rama, Siva and Hegadi pradhan.

THE NAVASAS

It is observed that the principal objects of veneration in these two temples are Siva lingas and the images of Chaturbhuja Maheswaras. Lord Khandoba is renowned as a God of Sakama bhakti - one who fulfills all the desires of his pious bhaktas. He is primarily the God of the masses, who take vows of different kinds - some being barbaric in nature too, yet the Lord blesses them for instant fulfilment. Devotees approach him for boons such as securing bride groom; getting employment; business prosperity; birth of child etc. On all the days. And on getting them fulfilled, they go again to redeem their debt called here Navas with elaborate prayers. As the Lord never deserted any genuine bhakta, his fame spread far and wide. People from long distances also reach him to pray for success in life. They visit again for offering navas, such as abhiseka, naivedya, vastras, abharanas etc. These are in common with many practices in vogue elsewhere in all most all temples, but here there are certain strange customs which have affected the social structure and brought dishonour to religion. The customs of the devotees walking across a burning charcoal trench, hanging from a tall pole with a hook thrust into the back etc. reflect their savagery. They are tolerable in a way; for, they affect only the bhaktas in question, but the custom of offering the child born as a navas had created many problems. The male children thus gifted to the temple are called Vaghes, and Muralis if they are females. In due course, the Muralis were forced to take to prostitution and Vaghes becoming nomads with little honour, wherever they went. Social reformers after great struggle liberated them, but still it is going on to some extent in a clandestine way, which proves beyond doubt Lord Kandoba's hold on the illiterate masses. And lol they form the majority of his following. That is the glory of the Hindu religion both in its dark and bright aspects.

POOJAS AND FESTIVALS

The daily worship is offered at three times. The first one awakens the gods in the early morning and ends with arati. The second one-the afternoon worship is offered with elaborate rituals called Shodasopachari and the evening one goes on till late in the night and closes with arati. The strange custom of offering haldi to the gods is prevalent here and every visitor invariably buys a packet available in the shops and offers to every god enshrined in several niches and mini-shrines. As every one brings and offers, one sees the entire ground is yellow in colour and the orthodox visitor feels it irksome to tread on the ground freely. More than camphor used in almost all places of worship, the offering turmeric powder called Haldi is very common. A unique feature nowhere practised in India. The annual festivals and utsavas are very colourful and they are celebrated with great fanfare. Chaitra, Shravana, Pausa and Magha masas attract thousands of devotees. Vijayadasami, Somanath Amavasyas are grand affairs, but the grander occasions are the birth days of Khandaoba and Mhalsa and their wedding days. The grandest ones are those when palanquin processions and fairs are held. The whole hills then turn themselves into Bhuloka Kailasa. Visit them! Enjoy the spectacles of the Lord's glory!! And be emancipated!!! ☸

POONA

It is the cultural capital of Maharashtra, besides being famous as the seat of administration for several dynasties. It has a glittering past, and abounds in many monuments that detain the visitors for days. Add they recreate spectacular scenes, if visited and tapped at the right source. The visitor feels the Maharashtra aroma exuding and hovering over the entire city. It is the birth place of Lokamanya Tilakji who shaped the destinies of leaders including Bapu. Among the worth-seeing, visiting of the following is a must and they illumine and elevate, besides spiritualising the visitors. They are the Shanivarpet and its Fort; the Pateleswaralayam, said to have been built by Pandavs; the Peshwa Park its zoo; the Kelikar museum; the Saras Bagh; Empress Gardens, Yerawada jail; the observatory; the confluence of rivers Mula and Mutha; the Sivaji Military College, and finally the Parvathi Hill, situated almost in the centre of the city.

THE PARVATHI TEMPLE

It is a pretty hill temple with a flight of broad stairs, luring the tourists and pilgrims alike. Located centrally, it has an additional advantage of a steady influx of visitors throughout the day, and all through the year. There are separate shrines for Parvathi, Vinayaka, Vitthal, Karthikeya, besides Samadhi of Nana Sahab. The archamurthi of Siva, Parvathi and Vinayaka are made of gold and are extremely grand. A visit here.

LORD MAYURESWAR OF MORGAON

UNIQUENESS

Man or God, here below on earth, or there up in heaven utters first the name of Vinayaka, whenever anything auspicious is undertaken, or at its very proposal even. Even the Supreme TRIO honour this tradition and set example by sincere adherence. The good old injunction is - "Aadou Pujoy Ganadhipah". So none thinks of commencing any work, whatsoever may be its size or significance, without invoking the blessings of Ganesh; nothing begins without proper supplication, even if the muhurt is fixed in nights; no function for public benefit or personal advancement is inaugurated without offering prayers to this Vighna Vinayak, the remover of obstacles; not even an illiterate, particularly Hindu, living far off, say in caves or valleys ever dares taking up any venture of importance without mentally seeking the benedictions of this Gajanana; neither the theist nor sceptic remains static without bowing physically or mentally, if ever this Lambodara's image greets the eyes; from the highest divinity including his parents down to the lowest imbecile never willingly bypasses the powers of this Ganapathi. The past is bristled with instances of appeasing the anger of this Lord with soulful prayers with all rituals due, even by the incarnated things like Krishna Bhagawan. Why, even Lord Siva his father suffered owing to wilful derecognition of his high office. Though not Manmatha with a glow of charisma, a Bhima with superabundant strength, or Brihaspati with versatility, or Devendra with supreme sovereignty, this short- statured, pot-bellied, portly-bodied, broad-eared, elephant- faced, much venerated rat borne god is holding such absolute sway over the sentient rational beings that everyone looks upon him with

reverential awe, for the supreme reason that every enterprise turning defeat-proof, emerges in flying colours, if he is gratified with prayers and kudums. By and large, he is the only god among the Mukkotidevatas adored by one and all, irrespective of this sect or that denomination fragmenting the Hindu Kalpadruma into as many leaves as it bears.

Sacred scriptures eulogised his status and office in such fantastic diction that he is equated with the august Trimurthis, and in many cases and on several occasions, he succoured assistance and lifted them from morass of despair, dragging them to its bottom. Of the many, delineating his multi-faceted career, Mudgal Purana claims priority in embodying a rich corpus encircling his life and the multiplicity of activities he is involved in. Though he is worshipped by the Hindu minded Indians from peaks to Cape and Dwaraka to Dharang Dzong across, it is only the erstwhile Bombay state that monopolised in worshipping him on a scale grand; fervour, inimitable; forms innumerable; and ways incalculable. Go across the state lengthwise or breadthwise, sure you can see everywhere his shrines in every village, niches in big temples, icons in street corners, portraits in every house, and pendants in the neck chains of the ardent devotees. The house may not have proper door, but it invariably adorns the lintel of the entrance with the carving or an image of Ganesh or colourful paper copy artistically pasted. Every hamlet, town or city celebrates the Ganesh Chaturthi, the annual festival in a grandiose manner with enormous expenditure exceeding the budget figure of some states, recently added to the Indian Union.

Ganesh is the family deity, community god and State divinity of highest veneration, and has been adored since time immemorial. And as such, the Peshwas of Maharashtra, nationalists of this state, particularly the proud sons of the soil have been drawing inspiration and sustenance from this benevolent god, since the dawn of religion. As he is the household deity of the illustrious rulers like Shivaji, family god of industrial houses and choicest daivam of nationalists like Tilak etc., several shrines of huge dimensions with sculptural marvels were built all over the state and

they became the centres of Ganesh Sampradaya encouraging Ganosopasana and propagating its tenets and glory. Some of the shrines have become so popular that a visit to them is deemed a necessity, and the bliss they confer is equally infinite and thrilling. Among the places of great importance as pilgrimage centres proffering sure solace to the theists, eight places deserve mention for visitation. And each enshrines one aspect of the Lord, and so has a characteristic speciality of its own with regard to background, glory, emergence, patronage, prayers, devotees etc.

The common tradition enjoins visiting of all the eight kshetras one after the other to receiving the full merit of pilgrimage, and they are separated by short distances from one another, and are located in a radius of some 50 km around Poona. The first kshetra is called Siddhatek and its presiding deity is Siddivinayaka. It lies on the river Bhima on Dhond - Sholapur section of Central Railway. The available evidence attributes the construction to Ahalyabai Holkar and patronage by several Maratha princes; the second kshetra is Pali in the Kolaba district, and the presiding deity is called Ballal Vinayak. The temple said to have been built by Morobadada Phadnavis, brother of the celebrated Nana Phadnavis is very famous; the third one is at Mand, and the Vinayak goes by the name of Varad Vinayak; the fourth is at Ozar in the Junnar taluq, and the deity is called Vigneshwar; the fifth is in Lenyadri Hills and the deity is called Girijatmaka Vinayaka and is enshrined in a rock-cut shrine; the sixth is at Ranjangoan lying on the Poona - Ahemdabad road and the deity is called Ganapathi, the icon here is a substitute of the original one adorned with ten heads and twenty arms, supposed to have been enshrined in a cell below the garbhagriha; the seventh is at Theur near Loni lying on the Poona - Dhond Central Railway and the deity is called Chintamani Ganesh and it was patronised munificently by the Peshwa Madhava Rao I and the last one is at Morgaon and the deity is called the Mayureswar.

The Margaon Kshetra is considered very holy and embodies several unique features - its past is glittering; origin awe inspiring; miracles, innumerable and legends, too many. And hence its

popularity far surpasses the rest of the kshetras. This shrine, besides enshrining the august archamurthi - Mayureswar, is housing eight images of Ganesh in the eight corners as mentioned in Mudgal Purana; it is one of the three favourite habitats of Lord Ganesh; it is this Ganesh who restored all the scriptures to the gods after killing Shanikhasur, the formidable demon, who stole them; it is here the visitor sees four different kinds of gods installed at the entrances of four gates and special offerings to them with rituals go by the name of Dwarayatra that confers manifold blessings; it is this temple visited by great saints like Tukaram, Swami Ramadas, Ganesh Yogendra etc., it is here Lord Ganesh killed Sindhu asura and reinstated Devendra in his former office; it is here Brahma offered his two daughters - Siddhi and Buddhi to him in marriage; it is here the Vikata avatara of Ganesh came to an end and he became Ganesh - it is this image, installed in Dwapara yuga by the Pandavas in the presence of Krishna; it is here Ganesh secured the services of Mayur, the son of Vinata and Kashyap and finally it is from this kshetra the Ganesh Sampradaya that came into being, gained ground and spread to the entire land through the saints like Moraya Gosavi etc.

Famous in legends and history, patronised by illustrious peshwas, visited by saint poets, deemed holy as the birth place of Ganesh sampradaya; sanctified by the visits of the highest celestials, eulogised in several literary works, secured an esteemed place in archives, drenched by sacred thirthas, this holy thirtha kshetra is luring lakhs of devotees throughout the year, both for darsan of the Lord and for the Dwarayatra - a special feature of this temple.

SOURCES

Several Puranas and literary works embody a vast corpus dealing with the Vikatavataara of Ganesh and his miraculous deeds that encircled the life of Mukkotii devathas. Among them, Mudgal purana gives an elaborate account of the whole life of Ganesh born as Gunesh here to destroy Sindhu, the demon-chief who dethroning Devendra inaugurated his reign of terror to the misery of the all

the worlds and celestials. Ganesh Vijaya is another that sheds light on the fame of this kshetra. The devotional literature embodies a great deal of information about this Lord Mayureswar.

ANTIQUITY

There are several legends dealing with the glory of this thirtha kshetra and the miracles happended in the lives of devotees are so many that they raised the image of this Mayureswar to the pinnacle of glory. And he appears as the redeemer of the Sokarthis, whose number is legion, including the Trimurthis and the Mukkotidevatas. Only a few are touched upon here, and sure they will hasten the readers to the holy feet of Mayureswar for benediction and emancipation.

The story begins with one by Chakrapani, the ruler of this region with Gandaki as his capital. He was a virtuous ruler, yet had a big problem that gnawed at the vitals of his life. He had no issues. He did penance with his wife Ugra, propitiating Surya Bhagavan. Lord Surya blessed him with the desired. When Ugra felt the weight of the embryo too powerful to bear in her womb, she let it fall in the sea. The sea pitying her, assumed the form of a brahmin and looked after it till it changed itself into a boy. Later he presented the boy to Chakrapani - the legal owner narrating the story. In memory of the great deed, the boy was named Sindhu. On coming of age, Sindhu did penance standing on one foot for over two thousand years propitiating Lord Surya. Pleased with austure tapas, he blessed Sindhu with all the boons including the Amaradhipatya except that of keeping of Amrit with him always - his chief ambition, adding that the Amrit would be with him as long as the container kept with him always and he would be dead, if he were to be deprived of it. It delighted everybody. The parents enthroned Sindhu as the king and left for Vanaprasthasram.

It was the opportune time for him to conquer the worlds and establish his absolute power all over including heaven. Assisted by like minds and soldiers as hard as stones, he achieved his object

of his paramountcy even over the Amaravathi, the capital of Devendra. All the gods including Brahma and Vishnu were imprisoned and then he unleashed his reign of terror. As ruthless dictatorship enjoyed its heyday, there was general suffering to all, and to the righteous it was unbearable. When the atrocities perpetrated on the innocent and ascetics including gods mounted, the captive gods prayed to Lord Maheswar for release. Deciding to put an end to the gravity of the torture, the Lord promised help through his son Gunesh soon. Thus emerged Gunesh into this world, but his infancy and boyhood were fraught with dangers. Sindhu, through his bhrityas decided to destroy Gunesh, but the parents guarded him always. Once he was swallowed by a giant Kardam, but came through the same mouth, tearing it to pieces. And before his grieving mother, he delivered a death blow to the tormentor who fell down dead. Knowing this, Sindhu determined to put Lord Siva and his family in the prison along with Brahma, Vishnu, Devendra etc. When his indomitable general, Kamalasur came on this purpose, a tough trial of strength between Bala Gunesh and Kamalasur ensued, and it was a child's play for Gunesh to kill him. With a single stroke he cut him into three bits and threw them into three directions, the legs fell at Padmalaya, torso at Rajur and head at Morgaon.

Soon after this spectacular victory, Gunesh making Morgaon his abode ordered Viswakarma to build a city for him around the place of battle with Kamalasur. And this is the Mayureswar kshetra which shot up into a prominence after a fierce war with Sindhu aided and abetted by Nandikeswar, Bhutanath and the whole army of ganas rallied under his banner. As Sindhu was blessed by Lord Surya, the battle turned stiff and went on for days but ended with the death of Sindhu, when the formidable ankush of Gunesh struck him against his chest. All the captive gods were released at once. On release, Brahma gladly gave away his two daughters - Siddhi and Buddhi to him in marriage and it was celebrated at Gandaki, his capital with unprecedented pomp and splendour, befitting the Creator's status and office. After solemnisation, Gunesh proclaimed to withdraw himself from this world in preference to attending to greater tasks. To commemorate this incarnation of

Gunesh also known as Vikataavatar, Brahma built a temple and established a grand image for worship. Then formal upasana was inaugurated with several rituals which is now in force in this Mayurakshetra. Several eminent saints enlightened by the Lord inaugurated Ganesopasana among whom Ganesh yogindra comes first. Now remains the origin of the name of Mayureswar given to Gunesh and worshipped here with matchless fervour.

The story begins with the boyhood sports of Gunesh. It happened - Vinatha and Kadruva, the two wives of Kashyap were not on terms. They quarrelled between themselves more often than not over the mischievous activities of the serpents - the children of Kadruva, who due to numerical superiority teased endlessly Garuda, the only child of Vinata. Vinata's appeal for Kashyap's intervention ended in advice that patience and time would offer solution definitely. In due course, Vinata gave birth a great egg. And she was asked to guard it carefully till hatched. The serpents though tried to harm it, they could not, but Gunesh who chanced to see it on his rambles, meddled with it; for it was too big and very curious in shape. To his shock, a big size, full grown peacock - mayur came out and immediately attacked the intruder - Gunesh. A stiff struggle began, but Gunesh emerged as Victor. At this moment Vinata appeared on the scene and narrated the prophecy, that he who would break the egg become the master of the off spring. She pleaded Gunesh to take him as his mount. He accepted; for, it was an unsought offer of honour. The Mayur too honouring her mother's word requested him to prefix his name to the victor's. He consented, and so he was called Mayureswar. This Mayur stood behind his master through thick and thin of his career and has been receiving prayers along with his master since the construction of the temple.

THE HISTORICITY

The present temple is built at a much later date by one Moreshvar Gole. It has also an exciting background and is imbued with mystery. This Gole was an official working in the treasury

department of the Sultans of Bidar. He was a great Ganesopasaka, known for his pious life. With a view to popularising the Ganesha cult, he renovated and spent lacs on the temple for making additions, like dipmalas, aisles, walls, etc. All from the treasury of the Sultans. The matter with many distorted versions and exaggerated forms reached the Sultan. The Sultan meeting him at Supa, the Head Quarters town questioned Gole, but the reply was that the coffers were kept untouched, and he was not guilty. The Sultan, on examination found the statement true. Would Lord Gunesh let down his true devotee? Would the honest labour go unrewarded? The Sultan then went to Morgaon to verify the temple. To his surprise, he found there on the same site a beautiful Darga and a grand Mosque. Pleased with it, he largely endowed it with cash and departed. Before he turned his back, again Gunesh was found holding his Durbar on a scale greater than the Sultan's, who was narrating all that happened, to the audience assembled then. If Gunesh desires mosques can become Mandirs, and vice versa. No bounds to the powers of that august divinity! Later, the Sabha mantap was added by karunwadkar, beautiful aisles by Sardar Muzumdar, and the arched gateway with drum house atop by Amrit Rao, the son of Peshwa Bajarao II. And many architectural decorations were made from time to time by the philanthropists and the liberated victims of misfortunes. The peshwas being ardent Ganeshopasakas, made renovations to the principal temple. By draining their treasure often. So its grandeur has been going higher with the passage of time.

THE TEMPLE

This famous temple is built on a fifteen foot high mound with broad flight of steps leading to it. At the entrance of the stairs, there is a big pavilion housing a big size image of mouse, the Lord's mount. As we go further, there is a mantap adorned with the image of Nandi. It appears ambiguous, for Nandi - the vehicle of Lord Siva has no place here, but it is there and has an odd background. The belief current explains that the Lord Siva's vahan was sculptured at a nearby village for the temple at Bhuleswar. During

transport after completion, the cart bearing it broke down, when it neared the present spot. Attempts to lift it failed. The priests then proposed to chisle it down to manageable size, but there heard an aerial voice that it should not be disturbed, for it wanted to be near Mayureswar to serve him. The awe-struck people erected a cupola and started worshipping it. A little further up lies the Mahadwara - a wide pointed arch surmounted by a nagarkhana. Crossing it, we enter the vast courtyard with the main mandir in the middle. Inside, there is another gate with two dipmalas on each side. Sabhamantapa, a spacious rectangular hall greets our eyes adorned with cypress pillars and cusped arches. Adjoining, there is a square room called shajghar, used as bed room for the deity. Next object is the shrine for Uagrabhairav. It is grand to look at, and he is the kshetrapalaka of this temple. He is reputed to remove many ills and release the victims of witchcraft from evil spirits, if special pujas are offered. Hence it is crowded always. Along with this, devotees offer prayers to Neelakanta and Kruttivas installed in separate mandaps to be screened from the effects of witchcraft and evil forces.

The garbhagriha lies at the southern most part. It is octognal in shape and is surrounded by a pyramidal sikhara in stucco - the spire built with two rows of niches and beautified with human figures and graceful elephants. In addition to this, there are many deities enshrined in niches and special mantaps, like Ganesh, Lakshminarayan, Kapil etc. There are eight images of Ganesh, like Vakratunda, Vikata, Haramba, Vighnesh, Balchandra, Chintamani, Siddi Vinayak, Lambodara, Mahodara and Dumravarma installed in the eight corners of the temple. Another unique feature of this temple is the installation of different images of gods at the four dwaras. At the western gate are installed the images of Rati and Kama, the bestower of Kama, standing for Asat Brahm; at the northern gate Mahavaraha - the bestower of moksha standing for Sat-Brahm; Lakshmi and Narayan - the bestower of Dharma at the eastern gate standing for Vishnu Brahm, and Uma and Mahesh - the bestower of Artha at the southern gate standing for Shankar Brahm. It is believed that offering prayers to these deities each one day during the first four days of the Sukla Paksha

of any month is meritorious and it is called Dwarayatra; and for full merit Bradrapada and Magh masas are advocated. Its mystical import and efficacy are so lofty and sacrosanct that people coming from distant places stay for four days and perform pujas with all the rites prescribed. There are 23 Parivar devatas in all, at several places in the campus and they are fittingly installed in niches and mandaps.

THE ARCHAMURTHI

The image of Mayureswar adored here is very huge. It is of the Swayambhu type, without much craftsmanship, but extremely grand to look at. It is in the sitting posture with trunk turning left. Diamonds are embedded in the naval and eyes. The metal image of Nagaraj adorns the head. The excellent finish and sheen are quite enticing and every devotee drinks in the nectarine beauty of the Lord to his soulful and desires to stand enjoying the sight long. The scriptural account adorns him with four arms holding amkush and Pasa in upper arms while the lower right resting on the knee and the left holding medak. He is flanked by Siddhi and Buddhi on his left and right sides. And there are both Mushaka and Mayura, his Vahanas in front. According to the local tradition, this is the same idol installed by the Pandavas in the august presence of Lord Krishna under the guidance of Vyasa in the Dwapara yuga, when they visited this place after the Kurukshetra war. The Mulavirat installed by Brahma now lies in a small but strong copper sheeted cell. So both these adorable images are at one place. The Lord was worshipped by Parasuram too. There are adorable trees, like sami and bilva on the eastern side and Tharti, called Kalpavriksha to the west of the main mandir. Devotes sit under them and meditate for bliss and emancipation.

THIRTHAS

There are several thirthas in and around the temple and their origins are associated with divinities. Among them Karna

Ganga is important and it takes its birth in the hills near Garuda. It is called Turiya thirtha and absolves one of his sins if bathed. It is said that this thirtha gave salvation to Brahma. And next in rank is the Amkush Tirtha, created by Lord Mayureswar for gods to take bath and was caused by striking his amkush at this spot. There are some more thirthas like Kapil thirtha, Vyasa thirtha, Bhima thirtha, Rishi thirtha, Pakrit Purusha thirtha, Siddhi Buddhi thirtha, Lasha Mushaka thirtha, Ganesh thirtha etc. Each has a mystic origin and is invested with special powers, and according to belief they are curing diseases and relieving the bathers from sins and diseases.

GANESH SAMPRADAYA

The story would be incomplete and the visit ineffective, if the significance and the origin of Ganesh Sampradaya is not known. The glory of Ganesh, the place he occupied in the Hindu Pantheon and the miracles he had demonstrated are all effectively propagated by many ardent devotees since the beginning, and particularly from the 13th century onwards. Among them, Moraya Gosavi and Ganesh Yogindra top the list. Both of them received abundant anugrah of Mayureswar and spread the Ganesh cult to the four corners of India. Gosavi was born with the blessings of the Lord to a certain Karnataka devotee. He was given life by a Sanyasin, when bitten by a cobra, and when initiated into Ganeshopasana by the same Sanyasin, he started his mission, and on securing the image of Ganesh in Amkush thirtha, he established it at Chinchwad in an impressive shrine. This one became the principal Mutt for the propagation of Ganesh cult. The other was Ganesh Yogindra supposed to have lived for two hundred years. Many peshwas accepted him as Guru and held him in high esteem on recognising his soul power. His yatras across the country and austere life were models to novices. And he authored many works, like Ganesh Vijaya, besides editing and interpreting literature pertaining to Ganesh cult. He was a powerful artist, moreover. It is said that Lord Mayureswar himself served him in the form of a brahmin in procuring material for his

writings. His contribution to this Sampradaya is monumental and his work Ganesh Vijaya brings out all that is to be learnt about the cult. His writings emphasise and justify the truth that Ganesh destroys all the indwelling demons, like Matsarasura - rivalry; Dhambhasura - arrogance; Madhyasura - intoxication; Mohasur - infatuation; Lobhasur - greed; Krodhasur - anger; Kamasur - lust and Mamasur - selfishness. His dedication to the propagation of his cult worked miracles and converted atheists and theists. Hence he is buried in the campus itself and the cell he lived during his life are now star attractions for Ganeshopakas. Visitor miss not these two places of worship.

POOJAS AND FESTIVALS

Thrice a day, this Lord is worshipped by brahmins - first in the morning at 7 AM called shodasopachari, next at noon and the last at 8 PM going by the name of Panchopachari. Two more pujas are offered by Guruva caste at 5 AM and 4 PM, but without naivedyas. Alankaras and pujas are also offered, adorning the image with ornaments and ceremonial robes on important festival days, particularly during Bhadrapada and Magha masas. For offering these pujas no fixed rates are fixed, devotees offer according to their mite. This is another novel tradition here. Vijayadasami, Somavathi and Ganesh Chaturthi are very important festivals, celebrated on a grand scale, when the whole Ganeshopasaka community congregates and participates lustily spending lacs, converting the township into Bhuloka swarga. Indeed, it is deemed as the Bhuloka habitat of Mayureswar, and the best of the three - the other two being Kailas in swarga, and Naga in patala. And this exceeds the other two in splendour and glory; for, all his sports were played here only. A visit convinces any. And belief lifts one and all. ☪

JNANESWAR MAHARAJ OF ALANDI

UNIQUENESS

Gratitude is a virtue that has a culture, commendable; capacity, inestimable; impact unforgettable; and a mode easily cultivable. It wins adulation from the Supreme Lord and it finds following in both the circles - best and worst. It is an outward manifestation of inward maturity, a symbol of divinity making the possessor ever respectable, and his word all acceptable, regardless of distinctions of any kind. So it has a large currency that grows without depletion, but increases at every redemption. It knows no extinction, nor tastes defeat at any time. It emits sweet fragrance. If reciprocated, it converts the steel balls into fluffy, creamy globules.

The expression of gratitude in the right form at the right time is an art and speaks volumes of inherent refinement one possesses. If expressed sans conditions, it makes the receiver's face glow and heart dance. Need not be face to face, but through any media even. It cares not time nor place. All it desires is only sincere expression. Persons and institutions thrive, if proper and adequate light is shed on this. The giver and receiver are blessed and they grow in strength and fame.

Monuments erected for the expression of gratitude turn places of worship and prove superior to letters, however masterly they are authored. Being three dimensional, they gratify even the unlettered. Moreover, their life is longer and utility greater. Hence the first choice for perpetuating the memory of gratitude extended to persons in return for the immensity of help received. Among the monumental monuments, the state of Maharashtra claims the

one at Alandi, built in memory of that immortal Jnaneswar Maharaj has a long history of the builders, and longer one for whom it is built.

The state of Maharastra, the erstwhile Bombay state in extent and spirit has a singularity inimitable in almost all spheres of human action. Their longing for excellence in objects of eternal significance, seeking means for attainment of the laudable goals; modes of tools utilised, endurance displayed during the course of operation; reacting to the receipt of fruit, and ways implemented to distributing and preserving the acquired are sublime, supreme and superb. To be true, they appear too simple but hard to imitate and obtain. The founders and propagators exude divine humility in its highly concentrated form and transform themselves into specimens - say, pole stars for humanity to profit by. Rather it appears that divinity itself takes those human forms to demonstrate the right means to be adopted for the utilisation of the inherent potentialities. They are the forerunners in fields spiritual or secular, and as such they entered the forbidden barren, craggy, slushy tracts and came out turning them into Nandanodyanas, investing ineffable charm to every object therein. Needless to add, the objects bear their creators' indelible finger prints. Politics and philosophy are the choicest spheres of action. The Satyagraha movement in a wide variety of its forms, religious propagation through a multiplicity of its sampradayas bear out this truth. In fine, they bear the stamp of their characteristic sublime simplicity, spiritualised humility and adorable nobility.

Among the sampradays like the Varkiri sampradaya, Nath sampradaya, Datta sampradaya, Ganesh sampradaya, Sakteya sampradaya, the Vaishnava sampradaya deserves deep study. Its strength lies in the strength of its founders and followers. The temple at Alandi extant visited by people in their lakhs to pay obeisance to that illustrious leader Jnaneswar Maharaj has a beginning, mysterious and a history glorious. It embodies many more plus points. Though there are many controversies about the facts concerning the dates of his birth, learning, tours, authorship and nirvana, it is affirmed by no less than a great saint Eknath that Alandi is the place where Jnaneswar attained samadhi. And he

introduced the practice of yearly visit to the samadhi for worship. Since then it has been attracting the attention of theists and scholars of repute, who with the munificent funds of great philanthropists built a fitting memorial. It houses a few images of Hindu pantheon, the Principal being the Vittala and Rukmini of Pandharpur. Among other worth seeing places in this temple, the Jnanadev wall is very popular and lures pilgrims and theists most. Alandi is also the abode of Lord Siddeswara, besides being the centre of Nath sampradaya. Hence eternal attraction. Sanctified for enshrining the samadhi of the most pre-eminent saint of Maharashtra, Alandi has become one of the premier centres of Advaitamata and a pilgrimage centre of eternal attraction.

NATH SAMPRADAYA

According to legends, Adinath was the founder of this great Nath Sampradaya that attracted the intellectuals more than the laymen. This Adinath who founded this was no other than Lord Sankara. It happened that Sankara once gave a series of discourses to Parvathi on philosophical subjects, on the shore of kshetra sindhu. He then explained all about the mysteries of man and Nature, deeming the shore was the fittest place, and secrets of creation and means for salvation would be secrets for ever, not knowing that the aquatic animals could listen to them also. Lord Mahavishnu desiring to learn them entered the belly of a fish and heard the entire discourse. He mastered. Matsyendranath born to that fish became the chief acharya to spreading that philosophy and became its founder too. It is believed that he was the avatara of Avalokitesvara and the founder of Kaulamarga. It is nothing more nor less than the Advaitic philosophy of acharya Adi Sankara. It caught the imagination of both scholars and laymen soon. As he moved from place to place on this mission and established his new creed through the miracles he made for the benefit of the afflicted now and then out of humanitarianism, it spread fast and took deep roots. His followers grew in large numbers. With a wide net-work of several branches, it covered soon almost all the states. During the desaparyatana, Matsyendranath came to saptasingi mount.

Pitying the mutilated Chaurangi - another name for Sarangadhara, the son of Rajarajendra who ruled from the present Rajahmundry, he sprinkled water from his Kamandal. At once Chaurangi regained the snapped limbs. Needless to say, people adored and joined his cult. His following thus swelled in size.

Matsyendranath initiated Gorakshanath. When Gorakshanath became very popular through his message, the cult attracted many young and learned men. Gahininath is one among such people who on being initiated began preaching, visiting several places in his desa paryatana. Like the phenomenon of magnetisation by induction, some of the followers, on acquiring eminence, and grown to the level of sainthood, initiated the deserving aspirants also. So the sampradaya grew in every direction and brought credit to the founder. The Nath sampradaya drew strength and sustenance from several works authored by Matsyendranath. They are many and authoritative also. Matsyendranath has yet another name - Meenanath, perhaps, due to his birth from a fish. Although he was Mahavishnu born to spread bhakti cult, he must have some earthly master. So he took initiation from Jalandaranath. As he spent his whole life in touring and preaching, practically every part of India claimed him. Gahininath initiated several young and learned men to carry on the message to the four corners of the world. Among them Nivrithinath was one, whose inherent qualities and resourcefulness ignited several sparks and lighted the whole Bharat. Saint Jnaneswar got his initiation from his own brother Nivrittinath at Brahmagiri, called by another name of Triyambak then.

THE FAMILY OF JNANESWARA MAHARAJ

Jnaneswar who occupied the highest seat among the saints of Maharashtra had a glorious past and an illustrious history. He was born to orthodox parents, renowned for their spiritual wealth and sublime religious culture. He was the contemporary of king Ramadeva Rao of Devagiri and was born in the saka year 1197. He was the second of the four children born to Vithalpant and Rakhumabai, the others being Nivritti - the eldest, sapan the third,

and Mukta Bai - the last. They were born in the town of Alandi situated on the bank of river Indrayani. Harihara pant, the grandfather of Jnaneswar held the post of Kulakarni at Apegaon situated near Paithan, a great city famous as a cultural centre then. Vitthal pant was a great scholar, whose mastery over classics brought him many admirers. And also a woman of wealth and chastity. It so happened that he developed unquenchable thirst for yatra to holy kshetras. Leaving his town Apegaon, he toured several places like Dwaraka, Somanath etc. and came to Alandi on his way back home. By chance he came into contact with Siddhopant, a prominent Kulakarni of his day. That providential meeting ended in making him a grihasti. Siddhopant drawn by his scholarship volunteered to offer his daughter Rakhumabai to him in marriage. The young scholar was in a dilemma; for he was no match to that family of position and status. Just then he had a dream in which Lord Vitthal of Pandharpur advised him to accept the offer. With his consent, the wedding was over and the couple went to Apegaon. He enjoyed marital bliss for a short-period. Shortly, after the expiry of his parents his interest in the world too was nearing expiration. As he lost prop, he grew restless.

Then Siddhopant brought him to Alandi and rejuvenated him, providing the best in life. Another problem raised its ugly head now. He was not blessed with children for a long time, despite praying to God fervently. Under the pretext of thirtha yatra, he went to Kasi. Drawn by the ascetism, and its freedom, he preferred Sanyasa, perhaps to be free from worries. He was given the name of Chaitanyasrama in accordance with the tradition. Forgetting wife and Alandi, he lived in Kasi, but not for long. The guru who initiated him into sanyasa happened to go to Alandi during his yatra. Siddhopant and Rukhumabai by chance met the guru, and when the lady poured out her anguish due to the long separation from husband, the guru then remembered of his giving Sanyasa to Vitthalpant. Moved by tears, he promised to send her husband and his disciple back to Alandi soon. On reaching Kasi he took to task Vitthalpant for deserting his young, chaste wife. And sent him home with the blessings that he would father famous children.

On returning to Alandi, he turned a new leaf. Fortunately one after another, his wife delivered four children who though lived for short period, each left a mark in the world as man of outstanding merits in the world of religion. They had many hurdles before reaching the goal as the orthodox brahmin society of those days excommunicated the family on the ground that they were born to a sanyasi. The social stigma was too much for them to bear at their place. And some inhuman bigots openly suggested to undergo prayaschitta by ending their lives. The children were not allowed to have the customary yagnopavitha ceremony. Everywhere humiliation in its ghastliest form appeared to the pious couple and drove them out of Alandi. And taking them to Prayaga it gave a water burial - Poor couple mingled in the pavana Triveni. Their Jalasamadhi, though left the young children in the mid-sea, the Panduranga Vithal of Pandharpur who was the chief cause of their emergence into the world did not leave them. He was virtually present with them. And invested them with supernatural powers, and as such, each blossomed into a rare flower, whose fragrance thrilled the whole world. Nivrithinath as he was called later after joining the Nath sampradaya was a renowned person who brought immortal fame to the cult by his scholarship. And also inducting into the fold Jnaneswar, who ultimately became the brightest star through his contribution to the theistic world by his philosophical works. The other two - Sopan and Muktabai died young, but before that they stunned the world with their atmic powers through miracles.

JNANESWAR MAHARAJ AND HIS WORKS

After the death of parents, the four though faced insurmountable social ostracism, they never fell victims to them; on the other hand they turned godward, who they knew would never let down the pious. There occurred then many awe-inspiring episodes in their life. They demonstrated many miracles that opened the eyes of the die-hard traditionalists. Once, when Changdev a great saint came riding a tiger to see Jnaneswar, Jnaneswar met him midway seated on his wall with brothers making

it move by his atmic powers. Several incidents impressed the public with their super natural powers. Alas! all of them did not live together for long, Sopan and Markabai died young. Nivrattinath absorbing himself in the activities of the Sampradaya was going on tours frequently, leaving Jnaneswar immersed in reading and writing philosophical master- pieces. Being a saint of high order and philosopher of immense scholarship, particularly in Advaitic school, he utilised all his potentialities to writing commentary on Bhagavadgita, the song celestial.

He authored many works, but only four of them became classics. Of the four-Jnaneswari, Amritanubhava, Abhangas and Changadeva prasasti, Jnaneswari is universally recognised as the Grandharaj in Marathi literature. Great scholars who did research on his Jnaneswari have vociferously declared that there are very few works that could stand comparison with it, in regard to poetic diction, selection of similes, delineation of central tenets, presentation of analytical observations, exposition of his new thoughts, freshness of approach, and finally sweetness of language. This magnum opus immortalised him more than the miracles he demonstrated during his life time. It is an unrivalled independent work that displays his superhuman powers. Tradition says that it was taken down by one Satchidanada Babu while recited by Jnaneswar during his stay in a Siva temple. How superb! What versatility!! How can it be otherwise when it was the voice of Siva that dripped like nectar and turned into characters when transposed! Hence, its hold on all the theists all over the globe through translations made. There is no wonder that the Varkari sampradaya extends to it the highest veneration by making the members carry it on head, whenever they go to places of worship.

THE TEMPLE

According to tradition, Jnaneswar attained samadhi in the presence of his numerous followers on the 13th day of the dark half of Karthik in Saka year 1218. There was no building of the present type then. When Eknath Maharaj edited the Jnaneswari after 300 years of his exit, he found out the samadhi and built a


huge temple around it befitting the glory of the saint. Later many additions were made with donations and munificent endowments of princes and philanthropists. The present temple is quite impressive with the immensity of its dimensions and architectural grandeur. It has three imposing gates - Mahadwar facing the north, Ganesh Dwar facing west, Hanuman Dwar facing east built by Diwan of Nizam, Shinde, Deshpande and Peshwas. The halls and courtyards are quite huge and provided with many amenities for meditation, besides darsan. The Veena Mandap and Karanja Mandap are extremely beautiful and spacious. The hall enshrining the samadhi is bereft of images either on walls, or ceiling, except those of Vithoba and Rakhumai in a special niche in the wall just above the samadhi. The spick and span together with the tranquility pervading the entire shrine, bends the heads of the visitors and places before the mental eyes the sublime figure of Jnaneswar teaching the Advaitic philosophy.

Offering prayers on Ekadasi falling in Nov-Dec, brings instant merit, it is believed. Thousands visit for darsan on this day and involve themselves in several special prayer services. The decoration to the metal image placed over samadhi with flowers and bright drapery is quite enticing and the sublimity pervading detains the devotees for long. The absence of Paraphernalia is another plus point that enhances the sanctity of the garbhagriha.

There are many more objects that detain the visitors in the temple for long. Among them, Sidheshwar temple takes precedence over others. It is adjacent to the Samadhi of Jnaneswar. The Sivalinga now worshipped has been existing since the Vedic times. The prayer services offered here follow the Saivaag ^{ma} though Maharastrian customs greet the eyes the visitors. There is a big size Nandi installed in a beautiful raised mandap and is placed at the entrance through which Jnaneswar entered first and had his Samadhi later finally. Next object that draws attention is the Ajan tree lying next to the wall of the garbhagriha of the Samadhi. It is believed that Saint Eknath who visited this holy place after 300 years Jnaneswar's entering Samadhi, found the tree encroaching the wall and other parts of the temple. He severed a root of the tree to stop its further

occupation, but its long broad branches are giving evergreen shelter to the Samadhi. Some aspirants for higher siddhi visit and read the works of Jnaneswar sitting in the shade for hours and feel inspired fit either for composition or gaining mental peace.

Another sixteen - pillared mandap built in the Hamadpanth style consecrated by the beautiful image of Ganesh on a high pedestal is visit worthy. Visitors miss not this Elephant-headed god, for they are aware of his august office - vighna nasak - remover of obstacles. Offering prayers, they move towards the famous Bhint - a wall that has an odd story. This inanimate object humbled the pride of a certain yogi called Changdev - a contemporary of Jnaneswar. Though a highly evolved soul, he was not free from egoism. He was a Siddhupurusha, and fond of displaying his yogic powers. Once, desiring to demonstrate his super human powers came to Alandi to see Jnaneswar riding a living tiger using a live cobra as whip. To teach him a lesson on humility, Jnaneswar sitting on a dilapidated old wall along with his brothers - Nivrithi, Sopan and Sister Muktabai ordered it move to meet Changdev on the way, in the street. It did Changdev's pride bit the dust in the presence of astonished onlookers in their thousands. The same wall is now preserved and visitors offer obeisance for helping Jnaneswar Maharaj to exhibit the power of his soul. In the campus there are many mandaps, like Vithal Rukhmini, Muktabai that are enshrining divinities. Praying at each brings merit. Meditating sitting in the campus any where has an elevating experience and the devotees normally sit in silence for a few minutes invariably on their visits. The Golden Pipal tree lying near Mahadwar has another story to tell. It is said that Jnaneswar's mother was blessed with four children glorious only after perambulating this after taking vows. It is an ancient one with miraculous powers. Hence the craze for the visitors to offer special poojas to it. There are many more objects outside the campus, like the Pundalika temple built on the bank of the river Indrayani that lure and confer beatitude to the visitors.



LORD BHIMASHANKAR OF SAHYADRI

UNIQUENESS

Contradictions or no contradictions; agreement reached or not; verdict passed gains credibility or not; posterity either accepts or does not; it is as true as history that Bhimashankar has been abiding at Bhimashankar for centuries, though puranas are at variance with regard to its location and time. And interpreters dangling in the air lean on the right side for some time and jump to the other, when a wisp of fresh air giving a jolt, tilts their equilibrium. If the products of the antarchakshu of the master minds differ and err, where can truth be found? When can it gain validity? Who will establish it? Discussions or dissertations in matters of spirit cannot, do not and shall not concretise the abstract truth, nor do they point to the goal, all they did is to keep the abstract as abstract in diction mistifying and logic misleading. Spirit can never be put into test tubes, nor religion allows distillation. Belief gives relief, and implicit faith ensures bliss, however imperceptible it may be. Does not divinity like the mirage always elude? Can anyone touch the far end of the rainbow? Is it possible to catch the wind in a cabbage net?

Brushing aside the claims, like that the real Bhimashankar is enshrined in the Kamarupa country i.e. the present Assam, not the one found at Bhuvanagiri village in the Poona district of Maharashtra state; or it is in that Dakini country now in the Nainital district, but not this one in Maharashtra, and leaving such arguments to ivory tower pundits, if we enter the hill temple at Bhimashankar, the All-Compassionate Lord Siva gleams into our sight and fills our souls with anugraha infinite making our countenances beam with

joy inexplicable. The Mulavirat of the temple situated atop the Sahyadri hills is one of the dwadasa jyothirlingas and has a glittering past and ineffable glory. This archamurthis has had a splendid past and is conceived of taking rest after Tripurantaka samhara on granting the request of his stay here to the gods who congregated to pour out their ecstatic joy over the death of that lokakantaka and express their gratitude. It is indeed magnificent to look at him though his form was roudra in its intensity and strength in totality. It has many other plus points that have been luring Saivites in particular and theists in general since that act of killing Tripura for universal peace. It is here the sweat drops of the Lord were converted into a stream which is flowing since then perennially under the name of Bhimarati; it is at this temple Mother Gowri is worshipped as Kamalaja indicating thereby that she was worshipped with lotuses by Brahma; it is here lies the Mokshakund that liberates seven generations of the forefathers of the person bathed; it is here lie several other sacred thirthas created by Dattatreya and Bhashitadevi; it is here lived the famous rishi Jabali; it is here located shrines for Sakini and Dakini, who helped Lord Bhimashankar in his war against Tripura; it is this temple built by two bankers unlike by kings and it is here the lokabhayankar Tripurasura met his death at the hands of Lord Shankar.

Consecrated by the presence of Lord Siva in the aspect of Bhima, enshrining the image of Gowri with the name of Kamalaja, eulogised as a thirtha kshetra, visited by great rishis and saints, patronised by philanthropists and embodying the sources of river Bhima, this holy yatrasthala has been visited by theists in their thousands for several centuries, specially from the day of Tripurantaka samhar.

SOURCES

Being one of the twelve seats of Lord Siva, several treatises are enshrining the glory of this kshetra and there is no dearth of

literature, nor historicity is bereft of adequate evidence. Sacred works like Siva purana, Koti Rudrasamhita, Tatak yatra, Bhimashankara Mahatmya and devotional literature embody elaborate accounts of this thirtha kshetra in addition to inscriptional evidence in the form of Sanads made from time to time by the rulers of Maharashtra.

ANTIQUITY

Its hoary past begins with a dreadful demon by name Tripura - Lord of three cities, whose unquenchable samrajyakanksha was quite uncommon and that indeed became the chief cause of Lord Siva's taking roudra aspect and killing him under the name of Bhimashankar. It happened - Tripura was an asura with a difference. Though over ambitious and power intoxicated, he did not adopt demonic acts for the conquest of universe, though his infinite potentialities could materialise anything and everything at any time with a mere trifle. He differed from his predecessors or even successors for that matter. Desiring to be blessed with invincibility, he propitiated Lord Brahma and started penance on the mount Meru standing on one leg with hands raised above his head for years. And as such he became a Vayubhakshaka, simple and total. Naturally Devendra was upset, presuming that it was directed against Devendrapadavi and with a view to nip it in the bud, he met Lord Brahma and solicited his counsel, appealing to him to ward off the lokas from the impending calamity. When Lord Brahma appeared before the demon immersed in his rigid penance, he asked for three boons - first, he should be invincible - none from surasuras or manavas should kill him; second, he be blessed with Kamagmana - power to travel anywhere he liked - under water or in the ether; third, his three cities must be made impregnable. Granting all the desired, Brahma said that he would meet his death at the hands of one, who with a single hit destroy his three puras. Power-mad and overjoyed asura, deeming that one next to impossibility accepted the condition laid.

The boons of his invincibility and the impregnability of his cities emboldened him infinitely and so he started abusing his powers. With the turning of head, he turned upside down of everything held sacred, laudable and live-worthy hitherto. His launching on a campaign turned out all successful and installed him as the Lord of universe which ended in making Devendra await his bidding. In conformity with asurapalana, the Vedic rites were discarded; ascetics dishonoured; hermitages destroyed and yagna, yagas discontinued. The woe-struck people bled and the mother Earth wailed unable to bear the burden of the injustice dancing naked everywhere - Dharma reached the lowest 'ebb. The afflicted approached Lord Siva with the supplication for his instant intervention. The enormity of ignominy brought to Dharma devata and destruction thrust upon the people moved him. Promising to taking up cudgel against Tripurasura, Lord Siva sent them away.

Assuming a gigantic form and putting on the aspect of roudra, he entered the battle field followed by his army of ganas including yogins like Sakini and Dakini in their fiercest forms. Tripura rushed with his hordes. It was a terrible war when the Lord was constrained to assert like Bhima and fought with an unprecedented valour and superabundant strength. The contest as it went on, became so dreadful that the earth trembled and Adishesha found it hard to holding it her on his head. The fiercest exchange of arms atlast ended with Tripura's three cities falling to pieces hit by the potent Trisul, heralding the death of Tripura. With the opening of the third eye of the Lord he was burnt in the flames. The exertion was so great that Bhimashankar sat down for a while with perspiration enveloping his whole body. At once all the gods hastened to thank Him for the greatest relief given and hailed his heroism. Pleased with their praises, he asked them whatelse they wished to be granted then and there. They with one voice prayed to the Lord to remain there in that form for adoration. And the streaming sweat should be converted into an eternal stream for bath. Flashing a smile he said 'Yes'. Thus emerged the adode of Lord Siva on the Sahyadri and the river was called Bhima after Bhimashankar. And since then, they became indispensable objects

of veneration. Just at this moment Lord Brahma offered worship to Mother Gouri for fighting fiercely against Durghashsur, a demon of great physical prowess and asuric powers while her Lord was engaged in war with Tripurasura. Her attempts to smash him down with missiles mighty, like mace, spear, arrows when failed, she delivered a death blow on the stony chest of the asura, which cracking fell down with streams of blood flowing. The witnessing gods praised her mighty valour with utmost jubilation. Lord Brahma after due prayers requested her to stay here along with her Lord and she be known as Kamalaja in token of his worship with lotuses. She agreed and she is installed in a separate shrine lying next to that of her Lord Bhimashankar

HISTORICITY

Though this awe-some episode occurred in the dim past and there existed shrines separately for both, due to passing of centuries they were not adored with ardour due. It is only from the second quarter of eighteenth century its importance started rising with the munificence of the Chimananji Antaji Bhide Naik, a money lender and banker of great spiritual eminence, who took up renovation programme on a gigantic scale. Like Dikshit Patwardhan, many theists and philanthropists, realising the glory of Lord Bhimashankar began construction work. During the rule of Peshwas, it received substantial grant from time to time. Regunatha Rao Peshwa built a tank and made some more additions for the benefit of the visiting public. The renowned Maratha leader Nana Phadnavis evinced great interest in its expansion and built the temple tower spending fifty thousands. Shivaji made many endowments including the grant of Kharosi village for conducting regular worship. Some ardent devotees like Abhayankar from Nagar donated liberally to meeting the cost of prayer service called Rudra Ekadashini worship daily. As its fame spread to four corners, many eminent people visited and contributed their mite in cash and kind. Even great acharyas, saint poets like Jnaneswar, Namadev etc. inspired by the glory of the Lord, authored several

works shedding light on its past eminence and present position. The various sanads made by the Maharastra rulers are honoured by the successive governments hence the continuance of ritualistic offerings to the Lord along with the celebration of periodic festivals.

THE TEMPLE

The temple of Bhimashankar is built atop the Sahyadri hill near a village of the same name. The old temple is of modest dimensions, not bigger than forty five by twenty feet and has a portico, antarala and garbhagriha. The Sivalinga installed with yoni in the garbhagriha was at a much lower level than the ground outside. It was discovered by a wood-cutter, and its story is fascinating. It runs - this wood-cutter, as usual started cutting a tree with his axe one day. At the first stroke itself there gushed out blood from the tree. Quite bewildered, he brought his cow and milked it against the bleeding tree; for, he once heard such story when the cow's milk stopped the bleeding. Miraculously the bleeding was stopped, but to his great astonishment he found on the next day a Sivalinga on the spot when the tree stood. As he was god - minded man he started offering worship. He built a small temple around the Swayambhu Sivalinga and with the passage of time it attracted devotees and developed in all dimensions. Ritualistic prayers and festivals were introduced later. This incident happened around 1350. Later in the eighteenth century, it developed into dasadisas with the advent of one great bhakta by name Chimanaji a resident of Poona.

The present new temple is quite big and built on the Indo Aryan style bearing resemblance to the Jain shrine. It has a square mandap in front of the garbhagriha, which is adorned with artistic embellishments. The ornamented door frame; elegant pillars and mural adornments resembling the figures of similar one at Nevas and Toke are superb and are heightening the grandeur of the temple. The sikhar with its size and artistry is adding grace to the

whole structure. Offering ritualistic worship we come out to visit some other important shrines adjoining the temple. The shrines dedicated to Kamalaja and Sakini and Dakini who helped the Lord during the war deserve visitation and they are in the vicinity and are installed in befitting manner. Situated up above the high hill and amidst the thick forest this temple and modest in proportions, its past enthralls the visitors.

THE THIRTHAS

Next comes the sanctity of thirthas. The source of Bhimarathi and other kunds lying very near beckon our attention due to the sanctity and oddity of the legends woven round them. The source from which Bhimarathi emerged is a small rectangular five-foot- deep stone kund with a small stream at the bottom. Then it flows underground to Mokshakund which lies behind the Main shrine and it is here the visitors take bath before entering the shrine. At dip in it absolves one from sins. It has an interesting legend.

THE STORY OF MOKSHA KUND

It runs - once there lived here a sage called Kausika with his wife doing meditation. There came one day a visitor by name Richika, who narrated his own strange story thus - he was an inveterate bachelor, who spent his whole life in meditation. On account of this pious life he was blessed with Kamagamana - travelling anywhere he liked - flying, driving, walking with atmic powers. He visited all the lokas and availed the darsan of deities in temples. Once he heard moaning sounds from a deep dark pit. When he went there, he saw several persons standing in mid air sans support. When questioned, they said they were condemned to this punishment due to one of their children remaining bachelor and they would be emancipated, if his sins were purged off. Further narration proved that the listening Richika was their descendent

responsible for their misery. He atonce prayed for instant solution. They directed him to Kousika, who by his taposakti would relieve them. Taking pity on Richika and his ancestors, Kousika dug a small kund in front of his asram and sprinkled Kamandal water. The spiritual eminence of Kausika was so great that Bhimarati came underground and filled the kund, Richika was asked to bathe in it to be freed from sin. He did. At once his ancestors obtained moksha. That is the glory of the Mokshakund. Here are located several other holy thirthas like Sarvathirtha, Jayakund and Kusharanya thirtha and each has a story of its own and confers merit, if bathed.

THE STORY OF GUPTA BHIMESH

At about a mile away to the shrine, there lies Gupta Bhimesh. Here, the river Bhima jumps from a steep peak into the valley below and falls upon the head of Sivalinga. The passage to this is very difficult due to dense growth of forest and also infested with wild animals. As the Siva could not be visible it is called Guptaganga. Its interesting story is linked with a king of Nepal who due to abuse of powers turned a fakir and during his wanderings he visited this Gupta Bhimesh shrine on the advice of one famous sage Gomil. With the grace of the Gupta Bhimesh he got back his kingdom and ruled happily there afterwards.

Besides this, there is another thirtha called Kridathirtha used by Gowri and Bhimashankar for jalakrida. Another famous one goes by the name of Vijayagrapada thirtha said to remove barrenness, if bathed. The last visit-worthy spot is the Patanasthala lying to the west of main temple. It is a steep gorge through which the Bhimarati flows down into the valley some hundreds of feet below. Tradition says that no one would be hurt, if jumped from this to the bottom of valley; for, once Lord Bhimeswar saved one muni balaka belonging to the asram of famous Jabali, when jumped from this as an act of Prayaschitta for causing death to a cow and calf due to his negligence. The boy when saved pleaded with the

Lord to save everyone from death, if they fall from this point into the valley hundreds of feet below. It was granted. Hence the attraction for visitation. The last but not the least in the list deserving to be visited is the Manmoda Rock cut caves and Chaityas of Buddhists who inhabited this area in large numbers.

PUJAS AND FESTIVALS

The daily worship is offered at three times. With Kakadarati, the first session begins when ritualistic pujas are offered. The second one is the Mahapuja, offered at 12 O' clock with mahanaivedya. It is elaborate and consumes hours. The third is at 4 O' clock, when the popular Ekadashini is offered with Rudramantras and abhisheka etc. There are no fixed rates for the sevās, but the devotees normally offer their mite without grumble and feel honoured and blessed for availing darsan and offering puja.

The Mahasivaratri is the major periodical festival attracting thousands of devotees. The place with colourful spectacles of Mother Nature in the height of beauty with green verdure, tall peaks, gurgling rivers and sacred shrines casts an enchantment on the tourists more than the devotees who visit the Lord for salvation. This is an invaluable asset to the Konkanadesa and by enshrining one of the dwadasa jyotirlingas, it has immortalised the Hindu India with a rare spiritual treasure lasting for eternity. ❀

DEHU

It is another visit-worthy holy thirtha kshetra, lying in the vicinity of Alandi, on the bank of sacred Indrani river. It is treasuring up the holiest Samadhi of Tukaram, one of the greatest Maharastra Saint-singers of universal veneration. This saint, hailing from merchant class turned a dealer in merchandise, catering not to the physical needs of the mundane world, but to that of spiritual world that immortalised and won for him a much-converted place among the Sankirthanacharyas of our punya Bharat. He was a contemporary of Shivaji, the indomitable Maharashtra lion, that made the Muslim rulers shiver in shivers at the very mention of his name. And his close male and admirer too.

The temple though modest in size and sculpture contains several memorable spots reminiscent of the power of devotion and the Almighty's eternal concern for devotees. It is dedicated to Panduranga Vittal, but enshrines the Samadhi of

LORD VAIDYANATH OF PARLI

INTRODUCTION

Slackness has no place in the general scheme of work, nor does it bring honour to any calling, or one employed for it; it commands neither respect nor enjoys security. He who is a slave to slothfulness slowly drifts towards condemnable dereliction of duty, which tantamounts to irreverence both to the dignity of the work, or honour to the individual engaged in. Indifference, say due to constitutional debility of nature temporary or of permanent even should not be allowed to entering into work; for work is worship. Each piece of work is divine and dignified, whether it is by nature tedious and exacting, or thrilling and entertaining, one has to perform it with sincerity and develop deep love for labour, only then the supreme Providence, who is a stickler for perfection pleases immensely and bestows boons infinitely to the point of satiety. Along with the theists, iconoclasts too are rewarded, rather held in high esteem by the Almighty, if they are sincere and tanacious throughout, and stick on to their ideals. And true to themselves; for, they being perverted start from the wrong point, or move backwards, due to conceit rising from ignorance and predominance of 'I' sense in them.

God, the supreme wants His children to adhere to certain principles of discipline; develop a sense dedication and devotion even to the wrong causes; for, when the wisdom dawns, of course at the end, the transgressor, defaulter, openly confessing treads the righteous path, strewn with lilies and roses that certainly conveys him to the paradise of plenty of eternal beautitude. Sincerity pays, tenacity wins and dedication succeeds to their own boundless satisfaction. There are countless instances of God's unqualified appreciation of tenacity and sincerity. Doesn't showering of boons

of demons for deep penance illustrate this? Although the instances are numerous and beneficiaries are countless, there is nothing that greets the mortal eyes standing in proof of gods rewarding the tenacity applied to wrong cause, or impudence persisted consistently. But the solitary temple of Vaidyanath at Parli, perhaps the only one that is perpetuating this truth. Here the Sivalinga bears on its head the marks of impiety perpetrated by one pious but perverted devotee, and the Lord prefers to be called after the name of that devotee, converted in the end.

UNIQUENESS

The sacred shrine enshrining the Siva linga with the marks of club on the top lies in Parli and it is one of the twelve jyotirlingas adored over centuries by people in their lacs. Surprisingly enough, many places in India are claiming this honour; and strange to hear they are called Vaidyanath temples. And at each place, the sthalagnas - local guides narrate elaborate accounts and corroborate them with some evidence or the other. Among them, the temple at Deogarh in the Santhal parganas in Bengal is one, another at Gangakhed in Maharastra, one more at Kiragram in Punjab, and yet one more at Dakhoi are a few that are laying claims and worshipping the Jyotirlingas of those places as one of the twelve Jyothirlingas. And the story narrated about its origin too more or less is similar and concurs in the essential aspects like the Sivalinga was brought here by Ravana and given to him by Lord Siva himself. The deity is called Vaidya-surgeon for the act of transplanting the nine heads of Ravana severed by him to obtain boons. Each is a Saiva kshetrā redolent of sivalilas. Festivals like Mahasivaratri are celebrated with great eclat when thousands of devotees congregate and offer several kinds of pujas. The thirthas of the places are connected with Ravana and their efficacy is still felt when bathed, and hence they are luring pilgrims round the year since the Treta yuga.

SOURCES

Scriptures abound in evidence of the glory of parli thirtha kshetra. Of the legends, Siva Purana, Markandaya Purana, Skanda Purana, Kulasatu-Tawarikh can be singled out and they attribute the existence of the Sivalinga to Ravana's efforts to take it to Lanka but could not due to manoeuvres of the gods.

ANTIQUITY

The Sivalinga of Vaidyanath is a gift of Lord Maheswar and it was granted after vigorous penance and exhibition of deep faith and devotion to him by Ravanabrahma. According to Kotirudra Samhita, Ravana desired to make Lankarajya invincible and the danava race immortal. He knew that Maheswar alone could bless him with the fulfilment of his desires and he alone would be easily won over by penance and prayers. Accordingly he went to Kailas and started penance. When it could not yield the desired, he began cutting his heads one after another and throwing them into agnikund as oblation. Without remorse nor expression of anguish, his persistence went on till he offered nine heads. Before severing the tenth, the Lord appeared and said, "I am indeed pleased with your devotion, ask anything and it will be granted onon". Waiting only for this, he asked for the Atmalingam that could ensure immortality to the adorers and invincibility to the place of its occupation. Lord Maheswar, the Omnicompassionate without forethought or insight granted it on the spot. Together with it, pitying at the loss of nine heads, he restored them. And so, once again he became Dasakantah - ten-headed Ravana. As the cut off heads were once again joined to the body, as if by skillful plastic surgery and transplantation by an expert doctor - Vaidya, Lord Maheswar was addressed by Ravana as Vaidyanath - Prince of doctors. Seeing him lost in ecstatic raptures, Lord Maheswar advised him to carry it home without putting on earth till he reached his kingdom. Promising to abide by the condition, Ravana started homewards holding the linga in hands with due piety.

But for gods, Ravana's obtaining the Atmalinga and becoming immortal by the boons posed a problem. Sure Ravana would besiege heaven and torture them. So they became nervous. They at one resorted to strategy to foil his efforts of installing the Sivalinga in Lanka. Accordingly Lord Mahavishnu taking the form of a brahmin met him on the way, when Ravana developed all on a sudden some stomach trouble urging him to ease out at once; for, according to the strategy, Varuna the Lord of Rain entered his body and worked out commotion in the bowels. Treating the chance meeting of brahmin at that juncture as a bolt from the blue, he requested the latter to hold the Sivalinga for a short while so that he could attend to the calls of nature. The brahmin agreed but before Ravana made a few steps forward, he deposited it on the ground saying that it was too heavy to be held it any longer. And lo! he disappeared before Ravana reached the spot. Infuriated Ravana cursing his fate crossly, tried to lift it but could not. Used his physical strength, courted failure, employed asurasakti, failed again. He pulled it up and thrust it down, shook it sideways and in all ways but the goal could not be sighted even. In his utter desperation, he determined to break it and so applied his heavy club to it. Alas! only a chip flew out from the top, when all his energy, patience, tenacity were spent out, he then resorted to prayers - started Jalabhisheka with waters from a pond, he materialised and filled it with water of all the sacred rivers of the earth. After that he left for Lanka grumbling, but he visited often for worship.

Though gods were pleased at detaining the Atmalinga in the Bharat Khand itself, their pleasure was short lived and the success was not complete; for, by confining the Atmalinga to the main land, Lanka became vulnerable of course but the Lankesa was still invincible and immortal due to the blessings by Lord Maheswar. Their grief was mounting higher and higher day by day. Then appeared Narada on the scene and promised them to solve that by some device. He went to Lanka when Ravana was worrying and brooding over his failure to get Atmalinga and advised him to shake the Kailas with his physical prowess to draw the attention of the Lord for further help in his efforts. Ravana relying on his

physical might and the newly acquired invincibility went to Kailas and lifting it high, shook with all his strength. It caused jerks on the top, and Mother Parvathi was perturbed much. She blamed her Lord for bestowing boons on the undeserving demon. Incensed Maheswar cursing him squarely then said that he would meet his death at the hands of nara - man. And his conceit would be humbled, when his whole race meet destruction. Unable to see adding fuel to the fire further, he returned home and consoled himself somehow.

THE BAIJU EPISODE

The Atmalinga popular as Ravaneswara linga thus left there was adored even after his death, by devotees, for long, but later in the Kaliyuga, the slothful priests grown impious due to amassing wealth by easy means, abandoned worshipping it. A cattle-keeper by name Baiju, who was regularly worshipping it with utmost piety, found this lapse unbearable. But he could do nothing due to his low position. In a fit of anger he vowed to break it to pieces with his heavy club for the sole purpose of opening the eyes of the erring priests. He tried but could not make any dent; for the Sivalinga was impregnable. Being adamant, he resolved to breaking it little by little as a daily routine duty. He decided to implement his plan before meal everyday. He put his resolution into practice. Before taking food, he was using all his strength on the Sivalinga with his club, but it remained stubborn - not a chip came out of it. Yet he continued. One day in hurry he forgot it and sat down for food; but before raising his hand to mouth, he remembered his vow. Dropping it, he dashed off and with uncontrollable anger he struck it with all strength at his command. The Lord pleased more with his tenacity than devotion, which was of no mean distinction, appeared before him for fulfilling his ardent ambition of offering regular prayers to the linga with due agamic rites. The ovejoyed cowherd prostrated before him. The Lord lifting him said that the presiding deity would be called Baijunath after him thenceforward. The priests realising their position corrected their ways and commenced performing pujas with ardour due.

LORD KAILASANATH OF ELAPURA

INTRODUCTION

Hinduism is a veritable ksheerasagara, treasuring up in its innermost bowels countless diamonds of inestimable worth. The humanist saint-seers churning it with their atmic power threw up certain gems of purest ray serene for the blissful existence of mankind. Among them a few, like amicability, integrity, veracity, chastity, catholicity etc. have brought immortal reputation both to those mahamaneeshis and manavali - benefactors and beneficiaries. Of the priceless virtues that made humanity live in cohesion; love for each other desiring to live under the green shade of harmony and practising toleration amidst fire of revenge merit the place of priority.

Toleration sprouts from the fertile soil of evolved soul and breeds catholicity first and last. Though toleration prefers total effacement for the benefit of others, moderation if accomodated, there prevails mutual regard that allows amical existence of both, ensuring thereby all round harmony, congenial for the progress of humanity in its entirety. Sure the vitality of catholicity inaugurates an era of castless, classless, sectless, gradeless, greedless society making the creator stupified at the glory of his own product, which in all probability closes down the office of Yama, as Chitragupta could only submit the Doomsday book completely blank. This is neither a wild phantasy, nor a streak of lunacy, but a stark reality, if at all catholicity is given free hand to play and allowed full sway over its dominion. The Eden then goes without Satan, nor Adam finds any cause to mouron over the misery of his progeny.

UNIQUENESS

A spectacle of that curious sublime world was created by Hinduism in the past, when man's religiosity flourished by the exemplary spirit of catholicity, dripping nectarine drops of tranquility, fraternity, amicability at every step. A true representation of the picture of cohabitation and perfect coordination can be seen even today in the Rock cut temples of Ellora caves, where Hinduism is seen enjoying inexplicable bliss flanked by world famous Buddhism and Jainism, of course, her own offsprings but proved in certain aspects mightier in impact. The sight of Hinduism's catholicity in action lifts the souls and dips the visitors in the ocean of beatitude. This picture of Mother-children enjoying blissful coexistence mirrors the essential feature of Hinduism. This rock-cut temple of Kailasanath has certain outstanding merits both in architectural designs and sculptural adornments that are attracting global attention as a superb specimen among the Rock cut temples of the world. Connoisseurs of art and aesthetes of fame grew eloquent in giving expressions to their just assessment and frank confession, which exhausted the superlatives, as it were.

The monolithic Kailasanath temple is adjudged as the most remarkable of all the cave temples in India. It was built by Danti Durga, a famous Rashtrakuta monarch of eighth century AD. Though there are many places famous for rock out temples, like Ajanta, Kasle, Kanheri Bagh, Mahabalipura etc. this group of 34 cave temples at Ellora are the largest and the most varied. And they are of three types - embracing three religions - the Buddhist, Jain and Brahminical. Their contiguity is another unique feature that registers the catholicity to the highest degree of gratification. The craftsmanship of the sculptors won the copious appreciation of several foreign travellers, like Masudi, the Arab geographer, who classed it as a celebrated place of pilgrimage etc. And a host of men of high eminence like Ferron Malet, Sykes, Farishta, Burgess and Fergusson followed suit, eulogising the superb artistry part by part.

The location of the caves together with the aspiration of the builders for construction has universal appeal and hence visitation by a steady influx of sight-seers more than the devotees ever since their opening eyes upon this world. Being linked up with another world famous cave temples of Ajanta, the touch-stone of the fresco art, the Ellora group has immortalised both the artistes and art patrons. Aesthetes, living all over the world, may or may not know the gods of Hindu Pantheon, but decidedly they have heard and seen some of them in the Kailasanath rock-cut temple here. Though the nucleus and locus of the central message of Buddhism and Jainism differ with Hinduism, and at times certain head strong pravaktas amongst themselves were at logger heads with each other, and later joined together to mount united attack on Hinduism, the catholicity of Hinduism is such that it extended its two hands to bring them into its own fold. It is here lies the universality of Hinduism and that accounts for the continuity of the spirit of eternity in its full vitality. Above all, although, this Kailasanath image does not have as much magnetic pull as some other Kailasadhipati's installed in temples like Kedarnath, Somanath, Kasi etc. with regard to offering of ritualistic prayer services or celebration of occasional and periodical festivals, its fame is neither less, nor attraction inferior. As a matter of fact, visitation by people and its frequency amazes everyone and publishes its uniqueness among the temples of India. It is one of the noblest Hindu relics of ancient India and an eternal monument perpetuating the glory of the stone cutters. And certainly an object of commendable pride of the state of Maharashtra and the crest jewel of Bharatamata.

LOCATION AND FORM

The world Ellora seems to have derived from Elapura, a flourishing city in the past-during the Rastrakuta kings probably. It is evident that it acquired fame as a centre of Buddhism even in the third century AD. It was called by other names such as Elura, Verule in the beginning of the Christian era. Later, along with Ajanta, it became one of the places of pilgrimage for Buddhists. It lies at about 20 KM north-west of Aurangabad. The

Ellora caves group consists of 34 and are excavated in the face of hill at about 250-300 feet high. They are in the form of semicircle, resembling horse shoe and ~~measure~~ about 2 KM from north to south with two horns projecting towards the west. The Buddhist caves numbering 12 are situated at the southern, and ~~are~~ the earliest in the point of excavation. They begin at the spot where the curve bends westwards. Next comes the Brahminical numbering 17, and exactly at its final one begins the Jain caves numbering 5. All these 34; though excavated at different periods are contiguous to one another, and what is more ~~are~~ existing in harmony without tasting the fury of iconoclasts. Another remarkable feature that surfaces when probed deep is that there exists some striking resemblances in the scriptural adornments in certain caves. The Kailasanath temple occupies the central place with 16 caves to the south and approximately the same number to the north. Does this not emphasise the catholicity of Hinduism and religious tolerance of the builders? Hinduism not only preaches the ideal - 'Live and let live but implements it in toto. Always! The ascent to this cave is on the south side, situated next cave No.12, marking the end of the Buddha caves. Though all the 34 have many similarities, each beckons the visitors and entertains with individuality and novelty of its own.

THE BUDDHIST CAVES

The Buddhist caves are called Dhedavada caves and are built between 350-550 AD. The name Dhedavada, as some opine is the corrupt form of Theravara standing for the place of Theras - the Buddhist teachers. The cave No.1 is a vihara having 8 cells for the monks to live in. The second with flight of steps has a verandah and dvarapalakas. It has a spacious hall for worship. At the back is installed all-foot-high image of Buddha in sitting posture. The galleries in front have beautiful decorated pillars. The third is vihara with a chapel at the north and enshrines the image of Buddha, seated on a lotus. The fifth is again a vihara, where the image is seated under a bow tree. It is called Dhedavada and the largest among the single storyed viharas. It ~~was~~ probably used as assembly hall. Next important ~~cave~~ is No.10 called by the name

of Viswakarma cave. It is a chaitya with a huge open court in the front. It was a favourite place for carpenters who worshipped Lord Buddha and Viswakarma as their patrons. It is magnificent in adornments and proportion that art critics like Fergusson and Burgess praised it in fine diction. It has a flight of steps and is adorned with five pillars and many figures. The remarkable features that greet the visitors here are a colossal statue of Buddha in setting posture and a horse-shoe window.

There are also well-built two-storeyed and three-storeyed caves that have indeed raised the glory of the artistes, along with the builders. The cave No.4 was called Dotal cave for long, but when the third storey was discovered in 1826, it became three-storeyed and the statue of Buddha is installed in the middle one. The Cave No.12 is three-storeyed and has huge halls and tall Buddha Vigrahas. The topmost storey houses two images of Buddha and the middle one is an elaborately carved shrine, grand to look at. There is an imposing 11 foot high Buddha statue in the first storey with huge halls in front.

THE BRAHMINICAL CAVES

The Brahminical caves begin where the Buddhist caves end. They are located centrally and in point of construction, they belong to a later period. So far the architectural design is concerned they are superior to the other groups. Richness of decoration in both architecture and sculpture strikes the eye from the first to last. From No.13, the Brahminical group begins, and the first one is called Dharmasala. It is a plain hall, so hastens the visitors to the next No.14 which is called Ravanka- Khai. It has an open hall and pradakshana marga. The south wall is adorned with many carvings, like Mahisharura Mardini, Siva and Parvathi. The sculptural art reached such high water mark of excellence that even the layman glues his eyes to every frame and enjoys for long. The scenes depicting Ravana's attempt to carry off Kailas mount on his shoulders, while Siva was dancing in ecstasy atop; next Mother Bhavani seated on a tiger with weapons in her hands; then Mother Lakshmi among lotuses together with Varaha, Chaturbhuja

Mahavishnu sitting with Lakshmi, are so absorbing and highly spiritualising in effect. Cave No.15 is called the Dasavatara cave. It furnishes the names of builders like Kara, Indra, Danti Durga etc. It has a sacrificial hall in the middle. It is two-storeyed and the pillars and columns of both the storeys are sculptured in a masterly way. Scenes depicting Siva Parvathi's wedding, Bhairava, Lord Siva rising out of the Siva linga to protect Markendaya, elephants pouring water over Mother Lakshmi, Lord Vishnu reclining on the five-hooded serpent, Vanara and Narasimha are superb and the stone cutter's artistry is admirable. The scenes representing Lord Siva inside a linga, and another where he is depicted as going in a chariot to fight against Tarakasura are adorning the southern wall. Each piece entertains and every episode elevates.

The Kailasanath cave coming next tops the rest and is the best in every aspect. It greets the visitors with two gigantic Dwarapalakas. It is vast measuring 164' x 109' and 96 feet in height. Its three parts - porch, hall and shrine are imposing in style, stature and sculpture. The walls are richly decorated with scenes from the Ramayana. On the southern side lie the statues of Ganesh and the seven Goddesses. The porch and shrine are connected by a bridge. The corridors too are adorned with several representations of Vishnu and Siva mainly, besides many other gods of the Hindu pantheon. Though it is an integral part, it stands apart and opens up a treasure house of sculpture and serves a feast too the visitors with its marvellous carvings, inside as well as outside. Experts in the art world, like Fergusson have praised it lavishly seeing from several angles, like name of builder, date of construction, its place in sculptural art and resemblance to others of this type etc. It bears semblance to the famous temples of Papanatha temple at Pattadakal. It is built by Rastrakuta kings in imitation of Kailasanatha temple at Kanchi. Experts have estimated that more than two lakhs of tons of rock is excavated to construct this and it is a master piece in stone. Its excellences have been elaborately described in the art books by several connoisseurs.

The remaining caves too are visit-worthy and are housing several images of supreme artistry. The Cave No.2 and 22 are called Rameswara Nilakanta caves add dedicated mainly to Siva.

The Cave No.25 contains the figure of Sun God with seven horses yoked to a chariot and is called Kumbhanwada cave. The Cave NO.27 is called Gopi Cave and No.29, Sitaki Nahani, perhaps for the type of images they possess. And all are grand. With this the Brahmanical caves end.

THE JAIN CAVES

The Jain caves are five in number, and are dated from 8th to 13th centuries. Though grouped in Jain, the group is called Chota Kailasa. It is an imitation of the Kailasanath but left incomplete. The No.33 is called the Indrasabha cave and the earliest of the Jains. It houses the statues of Parasnath, Gautama Swamy and Mahavira. The walls are adorned with Jain saints. The Cave No.33 goes by the name of Jagannatha Sabha. The stone cutters' craftsmanship exudes from each image, like Mahavira, Parasanath etc. The Jagannatha cave and Indra Sabha cave are connected internally. Their number though limited, their appeal is neither negligible, nor sanctity less. They have their individuality and glory characteristic of the founder and builder.

It is conjectured that Kailasanath temple though enshrining one of the twelve jyotirlingas is not so popular as other holy places, for the prime reason that its architecture and sculptural marvels have eclipsed its spiritual glory. Another view held by some other scholars give evidence that Ghrishnesa shrine situated some 10 KM off Devagiri is that much venerated one housing the Sivalinga deemed as one of the dwadasa jyothirlingas. Controversies may or may not establish the truth, but the architects and sculptors have really enshrined that most adorable Lord Siva, the Omnicompassionate in such superb way that this world renowned monument is serving a royal banquet to our eyes and souls. The builders deserve genuine and sincere most reverence for presenting to the world this gem of superb sculptural marvel for spiritual elevation and aesthetic admiration. These caves are most visit-worthy and have virtually placed Maharastra state on the religious map of the world. Their place in the art world is non-pareil; glory, eternal and cultural appeal, timeless.

BHAGAWAN BABA OF SHRIDI

THE PLACE OF GODMAN

If God and godman were to be kept in the pans of a sensitive balance, God vanishes instantly, say, even before the beam rises: for, He knows, His pan will certainly dangle in the mid-air, whereas his adorer's does not go up even a little higher due to heavier mass. Godman is decidedly weightier, mightier and holier. Nay, costlier at certain places, where He is monopolised by the money bags. Godman by virtue of the milk of humanism overflowing his entire being evidently yearns to share that ambrosia of unadulterated divine love to one and all sans distinctions, to making the world a paradise of eternal bliss. Hence, he is rated higher.

The godmen are the messengers of God, born with his amsas in various forms, differing in degree of course. They gradually evolve to spectacular stature and eclipse their Maker, or outshine Him in some cases. They are of many types like acharyas, saints, pravaktas, siddhipurushas, sankirthanacharyas etc. All but strive to changing man into god by ministrations and prabodhas, and ultimately come out victorious by lifting the sinking dharma and making humanity live in perfect harmony. By intense spiritual sadhana and propagation of the glories of gods, they transform the common man, lost in mundane world into devotees, who live in God always thenceforth. They in turn preach the might of devotion to increasing their fold drawing from the highest to the lowest, that could alone bring in equality and unity among people. The godmen not only see God, but pave the way for everyone to enjoy that spectacle of God's Viswarupa.

Naturally, they take recourse to miracles of infinite variety. It is only through them, they lure people to their feet and they

alone cement the faith of the followers in God, the All-time powerful. Pure devotion brings God down to dwell in the heart of the adorer, to give succour to him in all possible ways. At all times. To whom should credit then go? How could beatitude establish itself without that man instrumental for this? Is it not a good cause for God to delight at the outcome, and await the bidding of that godman? Isn't the maker of devotees then greater? As that All-Powerful Providence takes His seat in the heart of His devotees, could He retain His weight? His self-effacement and total absorption in the devotee, makes him massless and formless? Hence, He chooses to disappear at the sight the godman in the pan. Godman, God and devotee are comparable to a triangle, not an equilateral by the way, but a right angle triangle; its hypotnuse being always the longest.

POWERS OF GODMAN

The godman proves to be the most powerful and occupies the pivotal position. Without him, devotees neither exist, nor God could demonstrate His infinitude. He is as indispensable as breath to the living and light to the moon. Ironical it may appear, both are keeping the Omnipotent God at their beck and call; of the two-godman is decidedly greater. Godmen own neither kingdoms, although king of kings prostrate before them; currency, although by mere volition of hand they could create jingling coins in trillion billion millions; palatial A.C. bungalows, although owners of such keep them ever open for them; and vehicles, although all means of transport rattle towards them. With mere soul power they gain hearts than lands and immortalise them by filling them with immortal divinity. Yet, they are simplicity personified; and spirituality in motion. Their possessions comprise no more than a set of extra garments; a pair of wooden sandals, a water can and a stave. With this as the worldly luggage, they run, as it were, a regular transport from this world to the world above to taking the thousands of devotees to heaven, their blissful home. The life of godmen is an epitome of saintly simplicity, oriental sublimity and Arcadian humility.

BABA'S EMERGENCE

Among several types of such godmen, Baba of Shridi is a brilliant star that joined the galaxy of spiritual giants on 15 x 1918 at the age of eighty approximately. This date of his Mahasamadhi is a historic truth recorded in golden letters on the devotion soaked hearts of his adorers, whose phenomenal number exceeds millions, living in and out of India. Strangely enough, the details concerning as when he was born and where, who the parents are known to none, perhaps he too did not. Is it possible to keep account of those trivials, when he was born again and again on his mission of emancipating his fellowmen? But his awareness of the heavenly parents with whom he had constant communion, and how he measured the dimensions of that cosmic form of the Lord are recorded to such precision that precision itself wonders at that perfection. His life span covering over eight decades, amidst the simple folk is an evidence of the spectacular victory of spiritualism over materialism - a glittering record of selfless service and guiltless simplicity. His forceful spiritual personality has indeed left an indelible mark on the minds of devotees. His rustic simplicity and idealistic sublimity are far superior to fake saints, who rolling in luxury display their parrot learning in preaching austerity, piety etc., but know not the ABC of their composition or connotation. Has not he entered a dilapidated mosque and left it a place of worship of universal significance? When he came to Shridi, he chose that ruined Masjid and named it Dwarakamai - Gate way of the Mother, which became centre of his activities and place of worship for nearly six decades. He sanctified it, and it in turn deified him.

BABA'S CATHOLICITY

Baba was a Jnani, trikalagna, siddha, yogi and samskartha - all rolled into one. He utilised each one of the facets of his multi-dimensional personality for the right cause at the right time. The miracles he made raised him to the highest pedestal. This

simple Baba of Shridi became a marvel of the modern India, and a symbol of Hindu Muslim unity in a characteristic way that he has no parallels but himself. His favourite chant was 'Alla Malik' and it worked wonders, when uttered. Listen! He arranged for the conduct of Sandal Procession, an important Muslim festival on the Sri Rama Navami day. None grumbled. His world is filled with devout people of all religious and races. All belonged to him in as much as he belonged to them all, who held him in highest esteem calling as the saviour. He deliberately concealed his true identity, say, openly refused to disclose his origin, when forced by the judicial authority once. Hindu-Muslim unity was his sole concern. His followers - Hindus and Muslims became an impregnable single entity that they lived and moved in an atmosphere of perfect equality. They celebrated all festivals together without clash. He lived in a mosque, but allowed the burning of oil lamps, contrary to Islam tradition, round the clock throughout his life. Moreover, ringing of bells and blowing of conches were the routine practices there. All inside the Mosque. What an amity! Can toleration find any better advocate in anyone or anywhere? See! Bakrid on Diwali day, Ugadi on Ramzan. In this, he outstepped Kabir, whom he revered as Guru. Ram is Rahim and Rahim is Ram. Nothing more nor less. All listened to this and implemented its spirit thus. His message is simple and couched in the simplest diction. His clarion call to his devotees is nothing but absolute and abiding faith in him only. He says - "Believe in me with all your heart, and I shall protect you; turn to me, I shall look after you; cast burden on me and I will bear it; think of me in the hour of your trouble and I shall be by your side". Were they mere gimmicks as that of the politicians, or tall claims of a fake saint? Nay, there were absolute realities tested time and again. Hence the unanimous verdict - "He is the saviour, trust- worthy, and the only guide in the hour of need". Anything wrong! Was it fraud!! No certainly not!!! Being a godman, he embodied divinity in abundance. Neither it was conceit, nor deceit perpetrated on the guillible public. The fantastic number of his followers testifies to the enormity of the impact of his magnetic personality on the public. He is a phenomenon.

Many of his devotees received aid in multiple ways. He relieved their suffering with warnings about the impending calamities in advance, and those who heeded were benefited and non-believers regretted. Here is an incident of the non-believers - An Englishman came to Shridi seeking his blessings for a child birth. Can barren land turn Pushpodhan in a flash? Finding the time not propitious, Baba entertained not his supplication. The angry Englishman before his departure came to take leave of Baba; but Baba asked him to go the next day. The haughty white man went heedless of the advice and met with an accident on the way, in hours at it. Examples can run into hundreds. Beneficiaries are countless living near and afar.

BABA'S POWERS

Baba mastered yoga and demonstrated now and then. His proficiency was of high order in Dhauti - a kind of yogic practice of disgorging the intestines and hanging them up on the branches of trees to dry after washing. Many witnessed this spectacular feat. Besides, his supreme skill in Khanda yoga too struck terror into the minds of spectators. Once a stranger, who entered the Dwarakamai in the night was horrified to see Baba's limbs separated and strewn in different places, like head in one corner, limbs in another and trunk in the middle. Above all, he used to fall into trance now and then lasting for not hours but days. Once he entered into samadhi, and after three days he returned to normal state, as promised. But it created a great furore; for, the asramites were abused for keeping his corpse for more than a day, mistaking his trance for death. This display enthralled even the septs. Hence he was deemed and adored as prataksha daivam.

Nothing was impossible to him. Impossibilities bent their heads and carried out his bidding. Even the elements and planets too. Such extra-ordinary events deified him and people went to him in and out of the day for everything and anything. They were never deserted. Listen! It so happened, one night there descended a

terrible storm, with blinding lightning and deafening thunders. All on a sudden. People started running helter skelter, wailing and shouting. All the panic got concentrated at the portal of Dwarakamai, their sure safe refuge. No sooner did the heart-rending cries of the afflicted fell on his ears; he at once came out and shouted at the ruthless elements to stop. And lo! calm returned anon and the storm in a flash subsided without any trace. What hinders the public in divinising such earthly God? Could God do anything better? Not only the storm, even the fire also bowed to him, when there developed a conflagration in the Dwarakamai all on a sudden. By mere rapping with his pair of tongs his potent weapon, the all-consuming fire went down. How about waters then? Rivers originated from his feet and they were pleased to be at his service. Once a devotee by name Das Ganu Maharaj came to take Baba's permission before going to Prayag and Kasi on pilgrimage. Baba in his characteristic humour said that there was no need for him to go such long distances, but Prayag and Kasi were right at his feet. When Das looked at the feet of Baba, he found to his great surprise two streams-the Ganga and Yamuna flowing out from his toes. Many similars did happen and deified him. He always carried with him a pair of tongs and a wooden stick. They were as potent as Mace and Trisul of Mahavishnu and Maheswar. By mere rapping on the earth with his stick, he was materialising many objects and by thrusting the tongs into the ground, objects of his choice used to come up all on a sudden, sans uttering a word or resorting to gestures. He had infinite potentialities and put them to public good only. So powerful was he that even the mightiest power - earthly or heavenly was willingly and voluntarily shrinking itself into the minutest form to obey him implicitly. Wasn't he a potent amsa of that Omnipotent? Exhibition of such awe-some powers in the most spectacular way convinced the public that he was the personification of God. Veneration to him solved their problems. No distress remained a distress on meeting him. Mysterious were his powers that people worshipped him with infinite ardour.

BABA'S LEARNING

Another facet that stunned the scholars, was his proficiency in the sastras and the vedic lore. Though he appeared an out and out illiterate - ignoramus fakir, as pandits would brand him, his interpretation of sanskrit scriptures was astounding. Once he corrected Nana Sahib Chandrakar, a great scholar and gave the meaning of a particular sloka of Bhagavadgita by explaining the import of a word and its depth with his proper explication that stunned the listeners; It exemplifies his erudition in the classics. Learned people alone estimated his intellectual wealth, which was in no way inferior to his spiritual wealth. The pity is that it was not brought to lime light, perhaps due to lack of occasions demanding illumination. He was neither an acharya nor a dialectician, but his knowledge outstepped theirs.

BABA'S MINISTRATIONS

Being a siddha purusha, he demonstrated his atmic power only for the welfare of society sans publicity. Only with Udhi from his sacred fire, and a mere application of it at the right time, he cured many diseases pronounced by experts incurable, such as tuberculosis, epilepsy, bubonic plague, etc. As the number being enormous, cataloguing them is impossible. Suffice it is to mention that with his touch or sight or application of Udhi, he made the blind, see; mute, talk; lame, walk; deaf, hear; barren, fertile, etc. So there used to be a regular stream of the afflicted seeking his ministrations in matters of getting relief from evil spirits, and advice to securing advancement in profession, business and success in many fields. He responded to every supplicant and proffered relief according to the merit of the petitions. No genuine supplicant went home dejected neither the proffered relief was rejected on any ground. So soothing was his touch that every pain were subsided; fevers abated; snake bites cured etc. at once and on the

spot. The wailing returned home, hailing Baba as the mobile God in their midst.

BABA'S APPROACH

Baba's approach to spiritual matters is of a novel type. Guru, according to him, must seek disciples, rather the disciples approaching him for initiation, guidance and sustenance. Even if his beneficiary lives far off, he should be drawn to him 'like a sparrow with a string tied to its leg'. The modus operandi is odd. Baba used to convey a cryptic message or advice to the prospective beneficiary in a dream both for tiding over the problem, ~~harassment~~ and a line of action to be taken for the project to be launched. On crossing, naturally the beneficiaries seek the benefactor for better rapport and great cohesion. The deserving were benefitted immensely with this sort approach. There lies his greatness and that accounts for its unprecedented popularity. He bestowed on the seekers not only health, wealth, power, position, prosperity and honour, but Brahma jnana too. Instances are many.

BABA'S OMNIPRESENCE

Moreover, he proved through several instances that his adorers should not attach undue importance to his physical presence in Shridi, or to his human form. His supreme message is - "The body is perishable, but it is the self within which lies the true reality". And his common and oft quoted one - If you think of me, I shall be by your side to bear your burden. He kept up his word. So it emphasises the fact that he is not limited by time and space, nor bound by laws of Nature. Being a trikalagna he indicated the date of his death and the line of future action long before his Nirvana. His spiritual presence as said is seen pervading the entire shrine as evidenced by the dream of Lakshmi Joshi, who was awakened by Baba to go to Dwarakamai for morning prayers within 24 hours of his death. Another devotee, Ganu Maharaj who

was then at Pandharpur was alerted in a dream to reach Shirdi to cover his corpse with flowers on the very night of the demise. So emptiness does not greet the adorers, nor do they return home disappointed. He is seen everywhere - each object is exuding his grace and every spot relates its association with him and is ever ready to guide the visitors, if only they have absolute faith in him and his words.

More prominently, it is this Shirdi that enshrined his Guru's valuables under ground near a neem tree, and it is that treasure that gave him asylum for nearly 60 years, and it is this Shirdi that shot him up into firmament to shine like the Dhruvanakshatra. So he cannot and shall not disassociate himself from it. His physical absence is fittingly compensated by the gigantic statue installed just right above his Samadhi, which practically blesses now more with compassionate look than his words. Rarely samadhis lure such huge numbers both Hindus and Muslims, but it is an exception here and people are worshipping him with greater fervour than during his time. As his presence is felt and found to be more efficacious in warding off miseries, there is a phenomenal growth of his cult. Beneficiaries are not only visiting his Samadhi but erecting temples in several hundreds of places; for, as said, he is not bound by space and time. And wherever he is adored, and whenever remembered he is extending succour and keeping up his promise - "knock thou art answered; implore, thou art bestowed; cry thou art consoled, and it is immaterial whether from your place, or visiting my samadhi". Though prayers are answered without visiting the shrine, yet a visitation pays. The inexplicable bliss it confers, remains an unforgettable experience throughout life.

THE MANDIR

This place of worship and the headquarters of the Sai cult, though commands international following is not so imposing, nor adorned with sculptural adornments like temples. In tune with the spirit of the master, it is quite unostentatious, but very spacious,

rather as spacious as his heart. And his several sports. The samadhi is housed in a well built spacious hall sufficient enough to accommodate hundreds of devotees at a time. Its size and location please the eye, and the statue of Baba installed above it is extremely grand. The posture is sitting, and the sublimity emanating from it enthalls the visitors and impresses that they are actually in his physical presence. Its spick and span together with solemnity wrings veneration, and silences the turbulence of the worldly desires to an astonishing degree. Reciting of hymns or ringing of bells are conspicuous by their absence. Soulful prayers unconsciously emerge and surge forward to merge in the great Samadhi, reminding that by giving a decent samadhi to man's, eternal foes - like greed, lust and ego, one can get solace and lead an adorable life as that of Baba - a Fakir becoming a paramatma of universal and perpetual veneration. A simple small village turning itself into a premier pilgrimage centre, and the ordinary rural folk changing themselves into torch bearers. The other objects of visit are Dwarakamai lying next to it. And here the fire pit deserves reverence. The garden-outside the Main Mandir too is visit-worthy. The campus has many rooms and halls for visitors to stay, and the ministrations offered by them make the stay comfortable and prayers successful and memorable. contd from P. 88

Tukaram, which is receiving equal veneration by the visiting devotees. It has a famous Sankirhana Hall that narrates an exciting episode. Shivaji, on his visit to this shrine once, participated in the Bhajan programme led by Tukaram, who made the devotees oblivious of this world with singing of his melodious abhangas. Scenting Shivaji's presence, the army of the Muslim antagonists tried to trap and carry him as captive. Will Vittal the bhaktaparadheena ever allow such disaster occur in His presence? And to devotees lost in ecstatic singing at it? So he contrived a means of driving the Mlechchas out of the campus. Donning himself in the dress of Shivaji, Lord Vittal staged a mock escape from the temple through the main gate. The soldiers followed and gave a hot chase, but how far? The Omniscient God disappeared in the midst of thick forest, from which the soldiers went back crest fallen. The trusted will never be left in the grip.

Another is the Silamandir lying to the right of the main shrine. It contains the very sacred stone on which Tukaram sat for 13 days praying to Vittal, sans food and sleep, when his book of abhangas disappeared in the river Indrani. In the end, Bhagavan Vittal restored to him the lost treasure. That stone is installed here, and so the prayers due. In addition to these, they are many small shrines in the temple containing the images of adorable gods, like Maheswar, Mayak etc.

Around the shrine, at very short distance are found Machchi ghat, Bhandar parvat, Gopalpur etc. Each is associated with the life of the saint. The Machchi ghat is the very same place from which Tukaram's boat was washed away. It contains many fishes and said to be visiting Alandi and Pandharpur during the festival. The Bhandar mountain is associated with Tukaram's songs, and Gopalpur is the spot from where the saint went to have a bath.

LORD TRYAMBAKESHWAR OF NASIK

UNIQUENESS

A lie is a lie uttered by any, at any time for any purpose what so ever. The liar should not be exonerated; for, his deliberate distortion of truth brings woe to society. He has to be held up to eternal humiliation. Adequate understanding eases tension and confers bliss. So listen!

LIE has a tale long; impact, tremendous; following, large; glitter, beyond description, - all are but in the liability column and beyond redemption. Among its assets, sweet tongue and external dazzle receive first mention and best delineation. It is fed on the guillibility of its victim and thrives through deceit. It recognises not scruples, nor does it have qualms of the disasters, it thrust on its victims. It extends its kingdom over all the universes; works havoc at all times and holds to ransom the entire sentient rationals from the highest God to the lowest pig-headed imbecile. Its hypnotic power is infinite and overpowers all, though it lasts for a period trivial. Its charms seduces even the Omniscient - admits not immunity to any person, nor can it shield one from the marks of its grip. Classed as sin, it escapes not correction; for, Ethics circumcises it, to saving the credulous falling into its dazzling snares. Even for test or jest, it is to be forbidden. Always. If resorted to, the consequence - reprehension or annihilation is certain. More than humans, the celestials offer countless examples of how it causes disasters it thrust upon them, when fallen victims to suffice it. If one is singled out from the lives the Trimurti to exemplify its impact with an immobile monumental evidence found near Nashik - a township near Nasik in

Maharashtra. It testifies to the severity of its evil effect. It further publishes the calamitous consequences of unbridled anger, if directed against anyone for that matter, for any purpose even. Here Lord Siva is abiding along with the Lord Creator - for befriending himself to the abnoxious lair and Brahma for falling victim to lie.

The origin of the Tryambakeshwar temple, and emergence of the Barhmagiri hill in the township of Tryambak near Nasik have a fantastic background and awe-some legend. The temple enshrines one of the dwadasa jyotirlingas and has a long history of its own. And it commands veneration by virtue of possessing several unique features that have been drawing theists in large numbers since time immemorial. It is here Sage Gautama was absolved of his sin by bathing in the Ganga, brought to Brahmagiri by Siva; it is to this kshetra all the gods come once in every twelve years; it is here Ganga turns its course due to placing a blade of dharbha by Gautama and took the name of Gautami or Godavari; it is in the vicinity of this thirtha kshetra there lies Panchavati, where Sri Rama lived when in exile; it is here exist several ancient temples housing many gods; it is this territory that witnessed the scene of Surpanaka's adamant wooing Rama and Lakshmana one after another and losing ears and nose that gave the place the name of Nasika - nose that was later Anglicised as Nasik; it is in this region lie the Pandu Lena Buddhist caves; it is here exist many kunds named after the divinities and famous for Asthinilaya - immersion of bones and also offering pindas to manes; it is this thirtha kshetra classed as one of five centres of pilgrimage of all India importance; it was this place that served as the second capital for Maharashtra rulers; it is in this region lies Janasthana, where celebrated rishis like Agastya lived, and finally it was here in a cave called Gumpah in the hills lived Gorakhnath, the founder of the Nath sampradaya that played a great role in the religious history of Maharashtra.

Associated with the lilas of divinities, sanctified by the dwelling of the incarnated divinities and illustrious sages; visited by saints and acharyas; divinised by the holy thirthas, glorified by immortal writers in scriptures, patronised by famous rulers, this

thirtha kshetra has been exercising great fascination as a premier centre of pilgrimage since the vedic times.

SOURCES

As it is one of the twelve seats of Lord Siva, and being held very sacred due to dwelling of Sri Rama and sages, it is eulogised in the scriptures and literary works in all genres. Besides, archives are preserving certain sanads that shed light on the historicity of its place. The epics like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas like Padma, and Brahma Purana, Mahatmyas like Tryambaka Mahatmya, devotional books, Buddhist Chronicles and inscriptions embody several episodes running to thousands of pages narrating the glory of this thirtha kshetra. The corpus of information is quite copious and lends itself to hundreds of pages, if attempts are made.

THE ANTIQUITY

They are many legends about this place. Listen to the major ones. The scene of action is laid in Devaloka in the dim past. The story goes that Brahma and Vishnu were discussing the place of Siva among the Trimurthis. As they proceeded, a long and unending series of pictures of Siva's glory and the countless lilas he demonstrated sailed into their ken, and as such his image grew endlessly. Brahma fancied then to find out the 'adi' and 'anata' of his Viratarupa. When suggested, Vishnu accepted to go downwards to find out the bottom, whereas Brahma to go upwards to find out the top. Forthwith, Vishnu assuming the form of Varaha started digging to reach the feet - the bottom portion. He dug and dug - endless and timeless, but could not. Deciding to confess his inability, he returned. In the meanwhile Brahman, who went upwards riding his mount - Swan, felt thoroughly exhausted and determined to return and admit his failure to reach the top. Just then he saw a Ketaki flower coming down. He sought her help to

give false evidence in his favour. It accepted. Brahma then lied to Vishnu of his finding the top. Devendra and others disbelieved him. So they approached Siva, who reaching the scene with ungovernable anger proclaimed that Brahma was a liar, and so he should go without temple and worship in the world; for if a falsifier were to be let off-to go scot-free, there would be total chaos. His curse met with a counter; for, Brahma too rising to the occasion said in a dictjon equally vehement that Siva would be hurled down to Bhuloka and remain in the form of mountain, for he said anger is no solution to any problem and if it is not kept under control the result would be as disastrous as the lie that upsets the normalcy in the general scheme of working of the creation their when planets would go out of orbits resulting in everything ending in choas. A curse if once uttered runs its course and can never go waste, so no temples were built for Brahma. And for Siva, he found himself lay in the form of mountain near Tryambak. Later, after passing of the wave of anger, Siva was pleased to associate himself with Brahma in his mountain form; for, both as the highest gods deviated from the righteous course. Hence the mountain is called thenceforth as the Brahmagiri - a standing testimony of the effect of lie and anger.

THE LEGEND OF GODAVARI

This legend is still more fantastic, and is the longest, perhaps for the characters involved in this are numerous, and time it encircled too is many yugas. It begins with Brahma's striking his axe at prayag to preparing a sacrificial alter in the presence of devas and manavas for performing a sacrifice for Viswasreyas. The axe unearthed a chest. A lady of unparalleled beauty and myriad charms emerged, when it was opened. Her bewitching beauty was so hypnotising that everyone among the assembled - gods, sages, kings, warriors wanted to marry her. To averting the disaster, Brahma declared that, he who returned first making a bhupradakshana - going round the earth, would be eligible to marry her. At once, there began a marathon race with every biped

participating. Among them there was Sage Gautama. Although he aspired for that unearthly lady, he was no match with the mighty, healthy, weighty men participating. When lagging behind he saw a black cow giving birth to a calf. Going round it thrice, he came back to Brahma, and by quoting the scriptural authority, claimed the lady. Brahma could not brush aside his request; for, it is specifically said that going round a cow during the delivery of a calf tantamounts to going round the earth. So, the wedding was solemnised. Just then the contestants returned and found that the much coveted prize went to Gautama. Bowing to the verdict, they departed. Gautama at the instance of Brahma reached Brahmagiri and lived with Ahalya in an asram built in the vicinity.

It is at this time, Mother Parvati met with a problem. Finding her Lord's clandestine liaison with Ganga, she desired to get rid of her. When confided to Vinayaka, her eldest son he suggested to cut off Siva's jatas the seat of Ganga for solution. Mother Parvati resented at it, for her Lord should not be deformed. Then they took recourse to a strategam - sending out Ganga through human agency. Vinayaka with the aid of Varuna created an artificial famine on earth - everywhere except near Gautam's asram. So all ascetics came to him for shelter. He happily accepted to play host. It went on for years. During then, one day, by chance he drove out a cow eating away grain in his asram with a bunch of Kusa grass. It died as planned by Vinayaka and his party. So he was charged with killing of cow - a grave sin. To be absolved of it, only Gangasnana was prescribed. Anon he began penance invoking Siva's grace. Yugas passed. He stood against several attempts of seduction even by Mother Parvathi sending her maid Jatika to disturb his penance when the celestial beauties returned crest-fallen. Gautam's austerity brought Siva down. When Gautama was asked to name his intention, he expressed that Mother Ganga should come down from her place and flow here to enabling him bathe in her for getting absolved of the sin of Gohatya. Gratified, he bade Ganga to flow down. Though unwilling to leave her Lord, Ganga started flowing. Gautami bathed in it and was cleansed of his sin. Thenceforth, Ganga was called Gautami

after the originator. Thus Mother Parvati got rid of her Savati for ever. It did inestimable help to the land; for, Ganga with her perennial flow turned the deserted land into fertile soil, feeding thereby millions of people with bumper crops risen on the either side of its course, covering hundreds of miles. Godavari descended thus on the 10th of the bright half of Magha during the reign King Mandhata established for itself a highly coveted place among the rivers, and its basin gave asylum to several human species, who brought immortal fame to Mother Bharat. Now remains the visit to the temple of Tryambakeswar.

THE TEMPLE

The Tryambakeshwar temple enshrining one of the twelve jyothirlingas is quite magnificent and is built on the Indo- Aryan style. Its imposing dimensions, architectural adornments are quite befitting of its eminence. It is surrounded by a massive stone wall pierced by two dwaras and covers 260 x 220 feet area. It is built in black stone by Balaji Baji Rao between 1740 - 1761 on the old site which of course, was very modest in size and sculpture. Tall dipmalas adorn the Mahadwara on either side with its artistic design. In front of the temple a beautifully sculptured bull - Nandi is installed in a cupola. Another marble one is found inside. To the eastern most part lies a square mantap of huge proportions. It has doors on all sides and its porches are decorated with cusped arches and moulded pillars. Then comes the antarala lying between garbhagriha and big mantap. The garbhagriha is vast and well decorated with architectural designs and carvings of human figures, animals, yakshas, floral designs and the like. A graceful spire with curvilinear design rises from atop the garbhagriha and heightens its beauty with a dazzling Kalash. In the central part of the garbhagriha there lies the Swayambhu Siva linga. It has a minute crack from which the water i.e. Ganga drips forth constantly, round the clock and throughout the year. Tradition has that some times flames emerge from this, and also deep sounds of thunder not unlike the roar of a lion now and then. The linga is

covered with a golden mask adorned with five faces and a dazzling golden crown, donated by Peshwa Sadasiva Rao, supposed to have been brought from Delhi. It was an invaluable gift of the King of Mysore to a temple there, but carried away by Moghul iconoclasts during their raids. This is used on ceremonial occasions only; for daily purpose, a silver made single faced mask is used. The remarkable feature found here is the prevalence absolute quietness not found elsewhere. After offering prayers with rituals, the devotees emerge souls filled with the divinity pervading the entire garbhagriha.

POOJAS AND FESTIVALS

The routine worship is offered at three times a day. Each puja is an elaborate shodasopachari offered with Mahanaivedya and abhisheka. The Peshwas of those days donated lavishly and endowed it munificently with several types of gifts for carrying on the pujas and festivals on a grand scale with unusual splendour too. The successor governments have honoured the Sanads without alteration, hence the celebration with all fanfare due. With the offering of Sheja-arati at about ten O' clock in the night; the silver mask, a substitute for Lord Siva is put to bed in the hall of mirrors, built by Sardar Vinchurkar; a very grand gift beautified with enchanting adornments. The music and alankara at every session is quite enticing that offers a feast to ears, eyes and soul. Of the periodical festivals, Kushavartha snana is a grand affair. Every Monday, the Lord is taken to Kushavartha Thirtha in a palanquin to the accompaniment of music. The ceremonial bath is offered with several rituals, and after it the deity returns to the temple. During Dasara, Diwali, Sivaratri, Karthika pournami etc. several thousands of people from all parts of India congregate and lustily participate spending huge amounts on illumination, feeding and prayers.

PLACES OF ITINEARY INTEREST

This thirtha kshetra covers a wide area with a wide variety of worth visiting places - it is famous as the source of holy river Godavari; the seat of one of the Jyotirlingas; the abode of Siva in the form of Mountain, called Brahmagiri; the birth place of several thirthas like Varahathirtha, Kushavartha thirtha etc; the sacred tapobhumis with scores of hermitages of maharshis and centre of Bouddharmas. So it is a veritable paradise with gates flung open for the theists to visit thirthas And offer prayers, and the tourists to go about feasting their eyes with scenic grandeur of the primeval forests and mountains, on the lap of Nature in their full splendour. And Nasik the erstwhile second capital of Maharastra has many charms - religious and historical that detain the visitors for couple of days. And this sprawling city has all the facilities for comfortable stay too. Let us visit one after another moving from peaks to plains.

THE BRAHMAGIRI

This sacred hill situated in Tryambak, besides being the abode of Lord Siva, it is the origin of several thirthas, and caves for spiritual sadhana. There is the famous Gangadwara from where Ganga started flowing. It is almost in the middle of the mountain, accessible by a flight of stone steps and here lie many more sacred thirthas. A small stream of water flows down from a stone image of Gomukha and above it is installed a female image called Ganga. There is another temple dedicated to Kolhambika. Tradition current here says that a dreadful demon called Kolhasur started gulping down all the waters of Ganga. Then Mother Parvathi pitying Gautama descended and killed, but to fulfilling the death wish of the demon, she is dwelling here since then. Hence sacred and visit worthy. Next, there lie many more thirthas like Varaha thirtha, Viswanath thirtha, Mukund thirtha, Prayaga thirtha etc. There is a big modern reservior called Gangasagar, built to supply

water to the city, and then Gautamalaya another worth seeing place. There is also the Ashalya stream which joins Gautama, and the confluence is held sacred. These thirthas have add tales and are attracting pilgrims for snana, dhyana, sraddha, samaradhana etc. Religionists take bath in every one of the ashta thirthas and pancha thirtha groups and then visit several temples lying in the vicinity, like the Gangadevi temple which celebrates Gangavatarana annual festival on a grand scale. Besides this there are many temples dedicated to Lord Siva in several of his forms, like Kanchaneswar, Tribhuvaneswar, Rameswar, Gautameswar, Kasi Visweswar, Kedareswar etc. And a few more dedicated to Vaishnavate deities, like Rama, Parasurama, Krishna, Balaji, Maruti, Lakshminarayana etc. Some of the caves are visit-worthy as they are associated with Nath sampradaya.

NASIK

It is an ancient kshetra sanctified by the association and inhabitation of many celestials and Maharishis. It was renowned as the southern Kasi. The name is a corrupt form of Nasikya thereby means nose, the spot where Surpanaka lost her ears and nose for making amorous overtures to Rama and Lakshmana. There are about sixty holy temples, and famous kunds in front of them. Among them Sundar Narayana, Kala Rama, Narusankar are famous. Each has a fascinating story of its own. Their dimensions, rituals; sculptural adornments, deserve an indispensable visit. Here lies the Panchavati too, where Sri Rama lived with brother Lakshman and Sita during his exile. The temple Kala Rama is perpetuating his memory with several periodical festivals and it is deemed one of the finest modern temples in North were India. It is in its vicinity of 7 KM lie a group of old Bhuddist caves called Pandu Lena Caves, built some 2000 years before. Moreover, this sacred kshetra has been held very sacred since the Kritayuga and has been called with different names such as Padmanagar in the Krita yuga, Trikantaka in the Treta yuga, Janarthana in the Dwapara yuga and Nasika in the Kaliyuga. Its fame due to

habitation by Maharshis, like Agasthya etc. in the Jansthan lent spiritual glory to the whole of Bharat.

MONASTERIES AND SAMADHIS

Yatra will be incomplete without visiting a few famous monasteries and samadhis of many illustrious godmen, who stayed and expired here. Among them Brahmanand Maharaj, Ram Mahadev, Jagannatha Maharaj, Mauni Baba, Aradhi Maharaj are famous and they raised the glory of this place by their spiritual eminence. Here lived in the past innumerable sadhus and mendicants of several orders, like Niramani sadhus, Dasmani sadhus, Udasi sadhus along with the renowned Nath sampradayanis. Their festivals being celebrated with great pomp at different periods, they make this holy land a veritable Bhulokaswarga. On account of several kinds of the sadhus, like Jaganamis and Nirvanis moving about stark naked, and carrying on their activities, this place appears as a miniature representation of a spectacular divergency imbedded in this Hindu India, displaying its catholicity and universality at its best. This synthesis of divergent faiths make the kshetra a microcosim of the spiritual life of India. Moreover, this fusion of myraid - cultures found existing sans clash speaks volumes of the glory of this holy kshetra that has indeed won a dazzling diamond decked crown to the Mother Bharat. Nasik has a uniqueness that is unique among the centres of pilgrimage in India. Nasik and Tryambak have occupied the most exalted place in the religious map of India. ❀

AJANTA This priceless gift the sweetest poem in blackstone, and the first word in the world of art and architecture, the Buddhist monks left to mankind as far back as in 200 B.C. lies in this great Maharastra state. A mere remembrance of Ajanta flashes across the mental screen a series of cave wall paintings, renowned for elegant execution, aesthetic appeal and superb crafts-manship that has been hypnotising the connoisseurs and laymen since its coming to light in the first quarter of 19th century, though the caves date back from 2nd century B.C. to 6th century, A.D. The unity of their concept, combination of colours and sense of continuity are beyond the powers of description, and they take the viewers by surprise.

There are 30 caves in total, and are adorned with unique paintings and superb sculpture. The wall panels unfold the life and teaching of Bhagawan Buddha, as exemplified by the young prince surrounded by comely young women, amidst

BHAGAVAN MAHAKALA OF AVANTIKA

INTRODUCTION

Ironical it may appear that compassion embodies in itself annihilation - Samhara abides in Karuna. They are inseparable and so exist not in isolation at any time; where there is sweetness, there exists pungency, like the object associated with shadow. Doesn't the phenomenon of night following day embody this universal truth? Obverse and reverse do exist and then only life commands dignity, gains mobility, acquires beauty, why it becomes life as such and makes itself live- worthy. This Law of Nature is represented by Lord Maheswar. He is the personification of this eternal, immutable law. Although he is omniscience by nature and action, he holds the office of Destruction along with Brahma, in charge of creation - Sristi, Vishnu looking after protection - lokrakshana. Siva is the destroyer - layakara by virtue of his post, and hence some odium is attached to his profession - rather certain amount of aversion darts involuntarily at the mention of the word itself; for, every living creature deems life as sweet and desires to be chiranjivi-his living to be extended to eternity, if permitted; but not; yet the Lord is carrying on his duty with dignity; for he is not the killer, but he only snaps the bonds of moha-tying mankind down to earth. Lord Maheswar, the Karunaikasindhu assuming the aspect of destroyer is adored as Mahakala - the samharakartha at Avantika. It is a standing testimony of this universal truth. Avantika became one of the premier metropolitan cities of ancient India and trailed a blaze of light across the page of history due to Lord Maheswar's taking his seat here, and it is still continuing so, on account of preserving certain relics in the form of sculptural monuments, besides adorning the pages of literature with purple

patches of descriptions of infinite variety by immortal poets such as Kalidas, Bana etc, whose creative artistry invested the place with grandeur that surpassed Amaravathy, the first word in the inimitable grandiose splendour. This city went by the magniloquent name of Ujjayini - the victorious city in mythology, Ujeni in history, Avanti in literary master-pieces and Ozene in the travelogues of foreigners. The history of its past is vast and magnificent.

History, legends, inscriptions, monuments seem vying with one another in narrating its glorious past, immortalised by the valorous acts of illustrious monarchs, or glamorous episodes of the damsels born or lived here, or the amorous affairs in which the ruling high absorbed themselves with beauteous damsels. It had several uniques and the narration, if allowed fill pages countless; for, its history began in the remote past, and it was called by different names in different yugas, such as Kanakasringa, Kusasthali, Avanti, Ujjayini, Padmavati, Kumudvati, Amaravati and Visala. With these names, it shone as one of the renowned cities of the Akhanda Barata kanda, and so was deemed one of the seven sacred kshetras, like Ayodhya, Mathura, Kasi, Kanchi, Haridwar, Ujjayin and Dwaraka, listed down for indispensable visitation for yatra to obtain liberation. It was called variously such as Siddhavat, Akshayavat, Banseevat and Buddhavat. Situated on the banks of Sipra, it is a thirtha kshetra, advocated for thirtha yatra. Of the many plus points, historically and mythologically its importance as the seat of Lord Mahakala tops the list and won crowing glory to the place, followed by many others such as it is the sixth of the twelve Jyothilingas; the sixth of the eighteen sakthipithas, the dominating capital of valorous monarchs, like Vinda and Anuvinda who lent support to Duryodhana in the Kurukshetra war, Vikramadithya, the founder of Vikramarka Saka, king Pradyota of Swapnavasavadatta fame, Jayasimha, the builder of observatory, Munja and Bhoja of great renown; and the birth place of historical personages such as Devi, the wife of Asoka samrat and the mother of Mahendra and Sanghamitra, Vasuvadatha, the beauty queen of those days; the sacred place where the Kumbha Mela has been taking place once in every 12 years; the seat of famous gurukula, where Krishna, Balarama and Sudhama had their education under

Sandipini; it was the place, where the great nine gems of Vikramaditya flourished who immortalised its fame through several media and finally it is the Greenwich of the first meridian or zero degree.

Renowned as a unique thirtha kshetra in all the Kalpas, eulogised by the immortal creative artistes, patronised by historical personages, ruled by the history makers, and inhabited by mahamaneeshis and Vignana bhaskaras in every branch of known knowledge, beautified by gigantic monuments, visited by a long list of eminent foreign travellers, this famous city established world fame and carved a niche in the history of India, instrumental in luring lakhs of persons throughout the year. Aren't they due to the presiding deity, the Lord Mahakaleswar, whose sports elevated its glory to the pinnacle of glory and perched it there permanently since its coming into being?

SOURCES

Literary works from epics down to the pamphlets embody several accounts of this great kshetra besides inscriptions and travel accounts. Epics like the Ramayana, Mahabharata. Puranas like Skanda, Agni, Siva Purana etc., literary master-pieces like Megha sandesa, Raghuvamsa, Pratigna yaugandharayana, Kadambari, Priyadarsika Theravali, Kalkacharya katha, travel books of Periplus, Ptolemy etc. and inscriptions embody the glory of this place, with date-wise details. Neither obscurity nor ambiguity stands in the way of understanding the reputation of this place or its Lord.

ANTIQUITY

The city of Ujjain has a fantastic origin and it is dealt with elaborately in several legends besides the epic Mahabharat. Ujjain means victorious achievement, and it commemorates the victory of Lord Maheswar over the Tripurasuras. According to the epic, Vidyunmali, Tarakaksha and Kamalaksha, the famous sons of the

dreadful Tarakasura did penance, propitiating Lord Brahma for the boon of immortality. Gratified, Brahma appearing asked to name their desire. They expressed their desire of immortality. When denied on the ground that death is inescapable for every birth, they then opted for a boon of three cities of Kamagamana with provision for all conveniences i.e. the cities move - fly, ascend and descend at their command at any place and any time. Strange desire! Granting them, the Lord said that they would be unconquerable as long as they were not combined, and if they did they would be over-powered. Getting thus the invaluable boons, the three bade to make Maya, the danava architect three cities - of gold, silver and iron, one for each. Equipped thus, they were going round the world and visiting all places as and when they liked. They used to descend on places in the form of huge cities.

It is but natural, the places where they descended were converted into burial grounds. The animate and inanimate crushed under the dead weight of the cities were going out of existence. The affected, humans and devas unable to bear the loss of all and also fearing further deaths prayed to Lord Brahma for putting an end to them. Expressing his inability, he took them to Lord Maheswar. Though sympathised their lot, he too pleaded his inability, but volunteered to give half of his strength to whosoever readily volunteered to accomplish their request. Lord Brahma renewed his promise of offering of all that required for the asura samhara. Moved by the pathetic lot of the petitioners, Maheswar accepted. Accordingly Lord Brahma made the earth to transform itself into a big chariot with the sun and moon as wheels, the Vedas as steeds, and he - himself as Charioteer. Lord Maheswar thus provided went to battle field. The three wicked demons forgetting the condition, joined together and faced the Lord in the field. Though they put forth their energy undeterred, they proved no match to the Lord, who using Pasupathastra floored them easily. The victory was monumental and relieved the world from the ever worrying problem. That fierce battle was fought here and the Lord was hailed as the victor unparalleled. So the gods named the place Ujjain - the Victorious.

THE DUSHANA EPISODE

The advent of Mahakaleswar here has an interesting background. Though this place had acquired eminence as a thirtha kshetra, the worship of Lord Maheswar as Mahakala started with the atrocities perpetrated by Dushana, a dreadful demon living in the Ratnamala Hills near Avanti, the old name with which the present Ujjain was called then. The asura was of wicked type, who not only killed the inhabitants for sadistic pleasure, but relished the flesh of the corpses - a cannibal first and last. He was appearing unexpectedly to emptying the dwellings, and disappearing after leaving bones everywhere. People were mortally afraid of his name, why many used to breathe their last at the mention of his name even-they neither enjoyed peace, nor lived with dignity.

When they were passing through restless nights and graceless days, some among them suggested to approach a pious brahmin living in Avanti itself for help; for he was noted for his spiritual life together with practising yoga. A quite going man as he was, he neither craved for publicity, nor longed for worldly fame. He was a hermit, although living amidst mahanagara. Meeting him, they appraised him of the asura's wicked acts and the fact of premature deaths mounting higher day after day. Moved by the accounts, he decided to put his yoga Vidya to public benefit. Dispersing the people, he offered pujas in a pattern of his own to Lord Maheswar and prayed for his instant intervention. His yogic powers were of superior kind that Lord Maheswar coming out of a chasm of the earth at once caught hold of the demon and destroyed. The whole nagara breathed peace and then the people solicited the Lord along with the brahmin to abide in the city for their regular worship, which was granted. And since then Maheswar in the role of destroyer under the new name of Mahakala is abiding in the form of Jyotirlinga, blessing the people by relieving them from all kinds of distresses.

Though Lord Maheswar is adored in several hundreds of places throughout the length and breadth of Bharatha Khand, it

is here in Ujjain, he is called Mahakala for appearing in his role of destroyer. Agni Purana and Skanda eulogising the sacredness of this thirtha kshetra conclude that a mere darsan of Mahakala liberates the pious person and saves him from akalamitryu - untimely death. This God bestows on the devout bhaktas Salokya prapti - living in the sameloka; Sarupyamukti, assuming the form of the Lord, Sameepya sakti-living in the proximity of the Lord and finally Sujoyamukti - merging in the Lord, according to the desires of the adorers. And so the worshippers would never feel their desires unfulfilled nor worried with unfulfilled objects. Being the bestower of all kinds of mukti, particularly screening the adorers from untimely and accidental death - akala mrityu, he has been ascending in supremacy with the passage of time sans break, since installation.

THE TEMPLE

The famous temple of Mahakala lies in the heart of Ujjain - situated beside a lake of unusual dimensions. And it is in front of Devi temple. It is a three-storeyed shrine with a massive compound wall. The garbhagriha enshrining the Mahakala jyotirlinga is located in the ground floor over which two storeys are erected. This three-storeyed temple is beautified with sculptural adornments of many kinds. The archamurthi is about 3 feet in height and its pedestal is made of brass and silver with artistic adornments. The decoration of Mahakala with flowers and sandal paste feasts the eyes. The frontal view with sandal paste make up, beautified with two broad eyes between the long nose over the charming mouth adorned by the twisted moustaches is quite enchanting and the brass lamps lighting up the spacious garbhagriha heighten the glory of the Lord and leave an indelible impression. The architectural design though of antique type, its huge dimensions with, spacious verandahs and grand pavillions for several adorable deities detain the visitors for hours and lifts their souls. There are certain strange traditions here-one amongst such peculiar traditions is that whatever is offered to the Lord Mahakala can be offered again and again after duly washing. This kind of

offering of the same item for the second time is honoured and accepted. No where such practice is observed in India; for, once if anything is offered to God it is final and only the giver receives it back as mahaprasad, and deemed unfit for further offering to any god. Is not Mahakala combining karuna and samhara in himself, the most strangest among the strangest? Some reoffer the bilva leaves after duly washing them again. Sivapurana deals this topic at length and justifies it with proof. The visitors usually taking bath on the Ratnaghat of the river Sipra flowing nearby, worship the Lord with great devotional fervour accompanied by 'Harahara Mahadev' slogans which reverberating the entire region rend the skies to reaching the Kailas to awaken him, as it were to grant them boons.

THE PUJAS

The pujas begin 4 A.M. and goes on till 8 P.M. with great pomp and unparalleled fervour. The priests lighten the divinity by the elaborate rituals done according to the agamic injunctions. After prayers, the devotees go up to the second storey by a stair case from her. In the second floor, the presiding deity installed is called Omkareswar. From here too Mahakaleswar jyotirlinga can be seen through a window. In the third floor the holy image of Nageswar is worshipped with a difference. It is only once on Naga Panchami day prayers are offered. During the other 364 days, the doors are closed. So, huge crowds overflow the area, when opened and their devotional fervour reaches the peaks.

HARASIDDHI TEMPLE

It is another sacred shrine here equally popular as Mahakaleswara temple, and it is dedicated to Harasiddhi - a name assumed by Mother Gowri after putting to death of two dreadful demons. It is the sixth of the 18 saktipeethas and here three images are adored and they are placed one above the other. They are - Annapurna, Harasiddhi and Gowri. The emergence of this deity

has a strange background and it is narrated in Skandapurana. The story goes that Lord Maheswar and Gowri were once playing the game of chess in Kailas. As it progressed they were so absorbed that they were oblivious of the surroundings. Hara, one of the nine principal forms of Gowri acting then as sentinel heard some disturbing sounds outside. She rushed out and found two devils - Chandra and Prachanda by names who made bold to enter Kailas and create trouble - they were audacious enough to combat with Nandi the divine vehicle of the Lord when denied admission. Their out-bursts marred the tranquility of the place. Apprehending some trouble, if the Lord were to know of it, Hara prayed mentally to Goddess Gowri to punish the intruders. Thereupon Gowri made here appearance and smashed the devils. As her request was accomplished anon by the blessings of Gowri - she was called Harasiddhi thenceforward. Belief is current that whosoever worshippers her here with earnestness under distress, his wishes will be fulfilled as the archamurti Harasiddhi did in the past. The incarnations of Goddess Sakti are exhibited on the walls and the artistry of the painter is superb. This Goddess was the family Goddess of king Vikramaditya and hence received munificent patronage which is greeting the eyes of the visitors in its grandiose sculpture and vast dimensions. Sacrifice of animals was in vogue and particularly buffalo was preferred to appease the goddess to get merit.

There at a distance of 3 km lies a banyan tree in its miniature form called Siddhavata. Its size is remaining unaffected even with the passages of centuries. Its holiness coupled with queerness rouse curiosity and people visit and offer prayers. Belief current here is that childless parents if imprint, the letter 'OM' with cow-dung on the tree they are blessed with children. Queer are the sports of Bhagawan, aren't they? Belief brings benedictions, and benedictions brighten the future of the believers immensely. Infront of Siddhavat lies a Sivalinga enshrined suitably in a structure and it is called Anadikapileswar. There is a strange belief that it is slowly going down into the earth and has gone six inches since its inception. It is its uniqueness and there is divinity pervading by this oddity and hence pilgrims bound for Badarinath visit this kshetra,

to offer prayers first and then proceed for full merit and absolute auspicious journey. They offer pindas also here.

RAM GHAT

It is the chief of several ghats. There is a shrine here dedicated to Sri Rama and it is near the Mahakaleswar shrine. Pilgrims offering prayers to the deity, proceed to the main mandir.

WORTH SEEING PLACES IN AND AROUND UJJAIN

THE TEMPLE OF VIGNESWARA

It lies between Harasiddhi and Mahakala temple. The image of Vinayaka is unusually huge and measures 15 feet in height. Lord Vinayaka in his unusual dimensions blesses the adorers unusually too - removes all the obstacles miraculously. Hence name and attraction. In the shrine there lies the image of Panchamukha Anjaneya. Its oddity coupled with artistry is drawing attention and fulfilling wishes too.


JANTAR MANTAR

It is a grand structure built by the historically famous monarch by name Jayasingh. It is situated beside the famous Mahakalalaya. There are two sacred kunds called Gomati Kund and Angapat for holy bath. There is an asram here where Srikrishna, the eighth incarnation of Lord Mahavishnu and his elder brother Balarama along with their close chum Sudhama studied and it is called the Sandipini. Along with these, people miss not visiting the Batrihari cave lying at about 3 km from the temple; Kalbader Mahal, at 6 km off; Kalabhairava shrine at 3 km distance; Angapat Mandir at 2 km; Ganga ghat at 3 km, Triveni at 5 km, Chintamani Ganapath at 5 km, Vedaśala at 2 km and Ranjit

Hanuman at 3 km. As they are associated with the adorable divinities and historical personages, they lure the visitors and theists alike.


GOPALJI MANDIR - DWARAKA MANDIR

It is located in the central and the most busiest part of the city, yet tranquility dominates as religiosity always soars higher to taking a seat at the highest. The shrine is quite charming with silver plated door and well decorated ceiling and walls. It is in the main chowk and so accessible to one and all.

Being seat of many illustrious emperors and history makers, the city holds within its bounds many monuments, palatial buildings and sacred shrines with ponds adjoining them. Vastness and grandeur greet the eyes and feast the sensory organs. Legends embody detailed accounts of its former glory beginning with the episode of commemoration of Lord Maheswar's victory over Tripura. And its splendorous history associated with divinities continued during the following Kalpas with different names. So prosperity and fame it acquired, never diminished. The yatris return home, souls filled with divinity, bodies purged of sins, minds illumined and hearts pure. Experience alone convinces.  contd from 125

enchanted eye-filling settings. Embodying a wide variety of relics, like chaityas, viharas, assembly halls, they recreate vividly the spirit of the time, and grandeur of life led by royalty, and commonalty as well. The cave Nos. 16 and 17 exhibit a masterly continuity of narration through exquisite panels, running from top to bottom and side to side. They mirror the superb artistry of the Buddhist monks. The legends depicted drive home eternal truths, besides feasting the eyes by magnificence of colour and beauty.

Of the 30, the cave Nos 1,9,10,16,17,18 deserve special attention and indispensable visitation. The immortal personages - Bodhisattva, Avalokiteswara and Padmapani depicted there, throw a flood of light on the Buddhist way of life and their missionary activities. The popular painting of a damsel lost in her make up found in cave No. 18 decidedly is the biggest draw, followed by woman on a swing adorning the cave no.2.

These world famous caves resembling a horse-shoe in form are excavated in a rocky perpendicular wall of about 250 feet high. They are located at a distance of 100 KM from Aurangabad, the once capital city of Aurangzeb, the Mughal emperor, and was named after him. It also contains many monuments, like the Bibika Maqbara, a prototype of Tajmahal built in memory of emperor's wife and Panchakki - a water mill, where water was harnessed to turn large grinding stones etc. with Aurangabad as base, visitors conveniently make trips to Ajanta and Ellora along with Daylatabad, the capital of Tughluk lying on the way to Ellora. 

PROLOGUE

This is Printed again for full information on the Series

Temples, temples, temples, and temples; everywhere and anywhere can be seen in our *Punya Bharat* right from the high snow-capped Himalayan peaks, down to the salt-soaked shores of Kanyakumari, and Dwaraka to *kamakshipur* across. Just look up -- a temple tower piercing into the glimmering blue sky greets your eyes: or bend your head from any mount, the fluttering of a saffron-dyed temple banner assails your ears; stretch your gaze along any river bank, a concourse of pilgrims draped almost in wet outfit hurrying to temples gleam into your sight. How then about the case of concrete jungles and idyllic rural areas? Surprise overwhelms you now; for, either in street corners, or at cross roads, or under trees, or near ponds, or along highways, or in pathless forests, mini-temples enshining a wide variety of adorable divinities of all demonstrations of every major religion meet your eye and bend your head in veneration, provided you have well-developed theistic instincts, say in sound condition, of course. Justifiably they justify thereby, the omnipresence of the Omnipotent Lord in icon form to the naked eye, but to the inner eye, the concrete, living all-observing ever succouring Omniscipassionate Infinite Power worthy to be adored with flowers. Or sacrifices in extreme cases only. Does this not then appear that the sacred mother Earth, out of infinite compassion has thrown up in certain places, some of her priceless gems for the benefit for her own dear children?

Well, found hither or thither, called by any name, worshipped with paraphernalia or without -- *bahyapuja* or *manasapuja*, they all represent, rather stand for one, yes one and the same universal truth that there is one Power Supreme, the recognition of which alone makes the birth fruitful, living enjoyable and God's creation purposeful. And it is the duty indispensable on the part of every sentient being to accept the almightiness of the most HIGH and offer unconditional total surrender, that alone marks the cessation of the wretched sojourn in this mundane world, and the inauguration of upward journey culminating in *Sayujya*

These ancient temples -- abodes of gods were built in the days of yore by mighty emperors, ruling princes, *amatya sekharas*, *Navakotinarayanans*, *Dharma Pravaktas*, feudatory chiefs, tribal heads for the sole purpose of spreading *Bhakti* cult among the masses and classes both. As the motive behind such august enterprise being lofty and ennobling, it earned an ever lasting name to the builders, besides reaping divine grace. The practice is given a fresh lease of life from time to time. In every Yuga too. Hence the presence of countless temples throughout the length and breadth of *Akhanda Bharata khanda*.

In modern times too, though the Western impact robbed much of our ageless spiritual treasure, humanism and theism are installing the representations of that Absolute power in shrines of new models and diverse patterns, infusing into them modern spirit and western trends. In this century, a class of new builders have stepped into the arena and started building temples to spread *bhakti*, and spiritualise the core of decadent human nature due to ill digestion of several cultures into which man is thrown by force of circumstances. Many parts of India have been blessed with the construction of several kinds of shrines, although this noble task is sadly neglected by the ruling class. The industrial magnates and commercial houses have taken up this sacred work with a zeal seems for surpassing the bygone builders. Many

imposing structures have sprung up in all most all parts of India. Among the infinite number of temples built by religious institutions-charitable Trusts and philanthropic organisations, the shrines built by mighty Birla House are a class in themselves. They are different and occupy a conspicuous place among such similar ones due to characteristic Birla aroma - a speciality, rarely accessible to ordinary humans which is inimitable and unsurpassable in any point of time "By any" if affixed, it sticks hard and can't be erased even. The Viswanath Mandir in the Banaras Hindu University Campus, Banaras, Lakshmi Narayan temple in Delhi, Sri Krishna Mandir in Mathura, Birla Mandir in Jaipur, Balaji temple in Hyderabad etc., exemplify their matchless contribution to temple culture of modern India. The contributions made by Baba Kali Kamlia Trust, Ramakrishna Math and a host of other similar ones deserve reverent mention And visit-worthy as matter of fact.

Our scriptures embody thousands of references enjoining mankind to visit temples for a multiplicity of reasons The sight of the deities in their enchanting forms and postures, installed in ancient or modern shrines certainly has such a chastening influence, that even the atheist or iconoclast can turn the search light inwards to find out, where he and his black nature stand provided he frequents them, that in fact invariably makes him conscious of the right course of action to be pursued Further, their sculptural grandeur and architectural excellence touch at his aesthetic sense and bring in a change too In some cases Listening to hymns, chants and the like makes him oblivious of his base impulses for a while atleast. In many cases as a matter of fact Meeting of persons of varied cultures promotes mutual understanding etc Hence the advocacy of pilgrimage by every religion. (Vide-Yatra And Its Paramartha for a comprehensive picture)

May be due to predominance of theistic impulses a little more in me I developed a passion for visiting temples since school days, and that inborn mania is allowed to continue unabated despite the impact of western culture thrust upon me by the profession chosen and the post held for about 35 years As irony would have it, infatuation grew faster than my age and made me spin round, as it were, almost all the reputed temples in India I toured in all the states, except those lying to the east of West Bengal, and stayed couple of days in everyone of them; and months in several place like Banaras, Calcutta, Madurai etc To cap it, as it were, for five years now in Tirupathi -- the holiest of holies, where Suprabhatam wakes up and charges the entire atmosphere with Bhagavannama that fuels the souls to sustain till going to bed Additionally, my living in Tamil Nadu-the veritable temple state for two decades enabled me grabbing the opportunity of visiting every great hoary temple for dozens of times.

And when I looked out for means to occupy my retired void, I found the glory of temples and religion beckoning me to taking up for pleasure and propagation Indeed, its absorbing interest accelerated my evolving devotion and took me on viewless wings of imagination for preparation. As if a bolt from blue, my 50-day-yatra to North India, in Yatra Special in 1987 supplied me enough fuel for further flights and whetted my appetite. So I plunged into this holy work head-long with a special format of my own -- writing from the view point of pilgrims than tourists, i.e., laying stress on the sacredness of place, and necessity of its selection -- the legends forming the core to the characteristic glory of each temple So, everyone of the sections begins with Uniqueness, followed by Antiquity, and then Historicity before giving detailed accounts of temples, deities, festivals, traditions etc

I endeavoured sincerely to focus light on the glory of each visit-worthy place, I learnt from sthalagnas, of course leaning heavily on guides, booklets, folders and books dealing with them. Consciously, nay deliberately, I side-tracked the sculptural marvels and architectural excellences. Pilgrims normally care more for

divinity hovering over the kshetra then enjoying the aesthetic appeal of shrines. My experience fortified this: for, the yattris at the famous Dilwara Temples were hurrying down to visit other shrines, despite the honest attempt by the guide at eulogising the sculptural skill, which in my opinion, even Viswakara, the celestial sculptor too stands mute and thinks that he could have done his job better, had he visited them earlier. Even at Halebid too, my co-yattris behaved similarly and dragged me out, when my eyes were glued to the ceiling, exhibiting the unsurpassable craftsmanship of the sculptors.

Hence my preference for the divinity of the place than the artistry of the stone-cutters. There may be among my readers, one or two prototypes of Sir John Marshal, Col. Todd, or Ananda Kumara Swamy, who could see each piece with microscopic eyes for days to doing research later; for such gems, I am too small. I crave their indulgences for not rising to their level.

Now comes the part of redemption of my indebtedness. Of the many, who deserve space here, the sublime figure of Sri ILN Sastry, B.Com., B.L., CAIIB, the far-famed High court Advocate and Chairman of Experts Committee, T.T.D publications, flashes first across my mind meriting reverential mention. He is an eminent writer among advocates and a humanist advocate among writers, and hence his tenure witnessed a bumper harvest of rarities, and blessed the book lovers with many a ripe, delicious fruit. As his unbiased selection met with tacit approval of the Committee members; it was a Golden period for writers, and I am one of the beneficiaries. My inadequate diction satisfies in offering obeisance, and it is akin to a slender strand to the moon, as the adage goes. For his masterly FOREWORD, I bow to him again. Shri K. Subba Rao, M.A. Editor, SAPTAGIRI is instrumental in getting my type-script reach the concerned, though submitted late and his help at every stage is highly commendable. Albeit, my debt is above compensation, I express my veneration to him now. I owe my gratitude to Sri Gajapathi Raju, M.A. Regional Officer, Dept. of Tourism, Tirupati for giving opinion fine and folders many. And to my children, kavitha & Kiran for all, from start to finish. And my thanks to the proprietor Ramana Printers, for giving a pretty shape to my composition despite limited resources at command, particularly to efficient Sri T. Indrasenudu & Sri Balaram.

I offer my prostrations to MOTHER Parasakti, whose boundless compassion descended in the form of characters on my paper, now adorning your hands.

And soulful gratitude to Shri Balaji. Mathrdayanivasa for enabling my pen-craft to lighting up your way to the temples to avail the darsan of His aparupadivysobha in myriad manifestations. Expecting an early receipt of your enlightening experiences, I remain. Please do. ☸

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EPILOGUE

And now that the target is hit - the Kshetra Darsana Mahayagna - making a pious **parikramana** of Hindu India, starting from Somanath and ending with Trayambak, with a coverage 101 premier mokshapuris of eternal importance is over, let us sit for a while for retrospection before slipping into slothful complacency. Devoting a few minutes to striking the balance sheet certainly rewards the labour, besides paving the way for dignified living, ready to proffer counsels than receiving. When we commence the act of reminiscence, beginning with a survey of the area traversed from one corner to another, there parades before our mental eye an unending series of magnificent breath-taking spectacles of Nature's beauty interspersed with man-made structures, rising as it were, from the bosom of Mother Earth to serve a royal banquet to the eyes. Tarry a while before hurrying, for, that very remembrance passes inexplicable thrills, manifesting themselves in gleaming of eyes; fluttering of frame, smiling of lips and emptying of emotions with ejaculation - Ah! Life achieved its Paramartha - birth became Charitartha! True it is. Cent percent too. Neither it stands second opinion, nor modification. Listen why?

For a devout Hindu, better say an earnest deist nothing affords greater delight than visiting every blessed thirtha kshetra - be it dedicated to either Siva or Vishnu, Brahma or Sakti; Kumara or Ganesh, Acharya or Sadhaka; Maharshi or Sishya. Rather he deems the very contemplation more than visitation, a sure sign of elevation - an upward movement to reach his MAKER for bliss eternal. Should genuine wisdom act otherwise? Opt but for any? Does any ambition feel then bereft of its purport or intent? Whatelse there remains more than the component part yearning to joining the whole - like Jivatma surging to merge in the Paramatma. Haven't the Vedas enjoined, scriptures elaborated and tongues grown eloquent over the delineation of truth - God-realisation alone should be the prime ambition of living.

Many are the ways suggested and varied are the practices prescribed for this. Among them performing thirthayatra occupies a covetable place. Mahatmas, including avatarapurushas did this and bid mankind to undertake it without exception on any count; for, this holy ritual presents to the yatri-pilgrim an opportunity to witness the glorious spectacles of the Nature's bounteous beauty that remind him of the divine spirit running through all the objects of Nature and man enabling them live in harmony. And that harmony ultimately ends in establishing communion with God, the Almighty. In fine, he becomes a pantheist and begins seeing God in everything and adoring it with greater zeal. As a sequel, he practices to live in peace with Nature around, and be at peace with inside, in course of time. Can we forget the immediate advantages of meeting an infinite variety of people with a wide range of varied and distinct cultures, manifested in dress, customs, languages, traditions et cetera et cetera and et cetera that cleanse him admirably? To his own bewilderment, as a matter of fact, Read 'Yatra and its Paramartha in the Abodes of Gods Series No.1, pp 13-22 for more information.

Fortunately, there are countless kshetras scattered all over our Vedabhumi making it appear as it were, an open air spiritual museum studded to its bounds with all kinds of holy spots - places of worship for every stage of evolution of human intellect. These Bhagannilayas in addition to enshrining the adorable divinities are treasuring up superb sculpture of the master artists and the inestimable munificence endowed by patrons and philanthropists in several forms. And to visit them is by no means an easy affair, or accessible to all and sundry, though adequate

resources-physical and financial await their beck and call. According to scriptures, the merit gained in the life past determines this factor and propels him to spin round-point to point, lengthwise and breadthwise. And it marks the beginning of a bright career by inaugurating an inward change. As you are fortunate to possess it in plenty, you availed the golden chance of participating in this mahayagna - pilgrimage, and completed successfully with the unbounded grace of that Supreme Providence

And I, as guide - friend - philosopher high-lighted the divinity hovering over every kshetra visited, and the invisible power abiding in every adorable archamurthi. Installed either in gigantic temples, or topless and doorless temples Undoubtedly, the joy of experience gained in seeing, hearing, bathing, worshipping assumes such proportions that it exceeded the limits of description, explication, analysis or synthesis Could you measure it by any means? 'No' meets the question before it ends. Since wisdom says that seeing and hearing bears fruit only, when implemented, practise forthwith the several words of advice uttered by the priests and sthalagnas to make your self agreeable to you first, and then to neighbours. As nobleness permeating your whole being, exuding its divine aroma chastens the environs including fellowmen, they venerate, and follow you to making the world filled with santhi, sahana, souhardha that fulfils the ideal - sarve samstha sanmangalan bhavanthu Could not gods shower blessings on seeing such change in you? They do As the purpose of your yatra is fulfilled and my guidance is over, leave me alone to ruminate over the chain of events responsible for embarking upon this venture

Deep thought and careful recapitulation enabled me to present to the reading community a series of seven books, embodying short accounts of 101 most desirable centres of pilgrimage and their unique features etc. This indeed is of no mean job that could be accomplished in a split second as that of magician It is a Herculean task calling forth strenuous efforts both mental and physical And financial too. Yet, with the infinite compassion of the Supreme Providence, I reached the shore. At last In as much as you have become my alter ego, due to close association and company given throughout the journey-up and down and from end to end - i.e. reading all the books in The Abodes of Gods Series, let me share my joy and despair to you at this stage

If I open the chest to find out what trophies I have won and how, several memories - sweet and sour unfold themselves and overwhelm me by their oddities and unexpected twists Shocks and surprises spiralling up transport me to unknown regions and drop me back into this world after sanctifying me. As I have developed a tendency to see bright shafts in the glimmering darkness and hear sweetmelodies in the deafening thunders, that halcyon mood rewarded me with laurels in the end Moreover, I believe that he who lays his finger on the weak point is my well-wisher; since his genuine remarks alone screen me from falling into abyss It is an axiomatic truth that a writer or kalaradhaka engaged in creating objects for public utility never escapes from detraction, nor does he shun approbation They seek him unasked sooner or later. In my case, instant reaction used to reach me, for, my fans from the highest cadre to the lowest common-place kind of reader reacted quickly and spontaneously, and submerged me with bouquets and brick-bats, through letters and personal contacts. The wide spectrum of opinions covered a vast canvass and left some indelible marks for future guidance.

Let me record here a few that shocked and pricked me by their venomous tinge; and a few more that thrilled and lulled me with their pompous phraseology and sonorous out-pourings. I list down first the caustic ones that shocked me a little - Are you working on a thesis? Why this bombast in guide books for pilgrims? ... Aren't you displaying your half baked philosophy? ... Who reads, or needs those elaborate accounts of gods and goddesses? ... Would they boost your image? ...

Do you think, anyone dares throwing a second glance at them? ... They are tedious and monotonous. So on and so forth. These insinuations were heard and read without perturbation. But when some malicious green-eyed monsters going higher and dropped down Atom bomb - stop writing such rot. I began explaining, but they have neither time, nor culture to hear other man's views. Did I regret? or stop producing? No, certainly not. Their immaturity and causeless malignity were received and kept locked up, lest their putrid smell vitiate the atmosphere. Coming to the appreciation, I feel, less said more good for me; for, some of the opinions perching me atop the Everest deified me. Beyond my toleration, as a matter of fact. Their good intention and frank expression worked like an opiate and made me oblivious of time and place. Meeting me after reading the Somanath write-up in the Abodes of Gods Series No. One, which appeared first in Saptagiri Monthly, one exclaimed loudly - Is there such an intellectual writer in Tirupathi? We are honoured by your stay here. Your assumption, approach, argument, generalisations are superb. The opening part of every write-up is a master-piece and the sub-heading 'Uniqueness' is a unique of uniques. Maintain and lift the traditional method from the bog. Ah! What a presentation! The get up, layout are excellent. Your books are received like Prasada from Tirupathi, and they last longer. You are a sage, if not such feat could not have been demonstrated. Each item exhilarated, its grip cannot be released easily. Inspired by the contents and their narration, I convinced my guide of Chicago University approve my doing research work on the temple, basing on a write-up in your book. It was okayed. though we have been in the field producing temple books and religious treatises for more than seven odd decades, we have not done such wonderful work so far as you have. permit us to translate into our vernacular. Our periodical will be enriched with the reproduction of your grand articles! Honour us with your acceptance for regular reprinting in to in our journals. I feel glad to commend your books to Temple Libraries, and Information Centres, go ahead with many more. I am preserving them as sacred scriptures and read every day a page or so for spiritual elevation. let not slackness in sales prevent you from further production, carry on uninterrupted. Supply them to our guides to guide the tourists properly and masterly. Whenever you release a new book, forget not to post one copy for me, it is my earnest blanket request. your talent has been put to right use, posterity cannot but adore you. your name will be included in the Guinness Book. Well, a stop keeps us at peace.

To be fair and frank to all, some kind of pompous language has crept into writing, I admit, and I did introduce it deliberately in some places only. Let me draw the curtain aside now - the moment I apply my pen to paper, frankly speaking, I don't know how it proceeds, and where it ends - some mysterious force holding my pen runs across the paper. This is with regards to writing of the introductory part of every article, and while going through the typed copy, I used to feel that I exceeded the scope, but on reflection, it convinced me that I was right. And lo! it alone lured the evolved souls and literary men to such an extent that they heaped encomiums. Disproportionately, I think. The introductory part to Ayodhya is AGS No. 2 and Kutralamanikyam Temple in AGS No.5 can be cited for this in proof. Many others, why almost all drew reverent attention by the discerning readers. Secondly, to the charge of boosting my image by such fantastic accounts on gods or places, it is baseless. Is it not a fact that creative literature differs from the insipid reporting jargon? What all I wanted, and tried consciously also is to animate or enthuse the readers by sufficient warming up their beings. Nothing more nor less. It drew applause from many, and evoked dislike in a few too. Anyway, it is a way, and that is my style, characterised by luxuriant fancy, virulent expression and exuberant thought, remarking a critic friend ended that intensely as its distinguishing quality.

For one thing I have to bow to my readers unconditionally and invariably - the commissions of every type - some are, of course, the printers' called the Printer's devils and many are mine can be termed as composer's ills, are permeating in all books. It is inexcusable. I confess that I did not do justice to my work, due to lack of time. And improper proof-reading too primarily. Importantly, I did all single-handed in great haste - used to complete the writing part of each book in less than a month, inclusive of supervising the typing, proof-reading etc. Hence the commissions galore. I chant and practise 'prapathi' slogan before anyone that rises his gun to hit this target. Reading with care and pondering over deeply certainly obviate the difficulty and makes comprehension easy, that alone I could advocate to them with all humility due. and assure of their non-recurrence in future

About photos - securing of photos for better visual appeal. and procuring of books for source material posed many problems; for, I do not commence working on any write up without seeing personally the places I write upon, and listening to accounts I narrated by the competent authorities. Out of the 101 kshetras included, about half a dozen or more are not visited by me. This incidentally is another factor that contributed to elaboration of certain items which the busy - bees liked, but the lotus-eaters shrank at their size.

Though I very much like to lay down my pen after the printing of the 7th. the last in the series, I am not allowed by many intellectuals, holding the highest posts in the universities and the ordinary semi-literates also. Swept off by my approach and style, the former class solicited me honestly to write on Bouddha Chaityas and Jain Mandirs, when met during my travels. As I like the theme, I decided to oblige, and I am at it. Curiously enough, a Christian friend perusing a few pages in the Series No 5 exhorted - why have you left our Churches in the lurch? Please write on apostles and disciples great, soon. Pleased with his sincerity, I quipped, to put him in good humour that my next one is on the Churches and Mosques of India. It gratified him most, but later it worried me a little, since I could not take it up. Reason I am not competent to deal with such themes with the little knowledge I have about them. Anyhow. if time permits I will; for the primary reason that all places of worship are equal and attracted me infinitely. I visited mosques and churches too in the past. Only occasionally, please.

Making obeisance to you, my reverent reader and admirers once again for lending ears for such a long time and putting up with my prattle, I take leave for the time being, awaiting anxiously to see your hands adorned with my Single Temple Series, which are in progress at this moment, till then bye bye . .

Subham Bhagat.

Sincerely yours

(Sd/-) K.K. MOORTHY





Mayureswar - Morgaon



Mother Mahalakshmi - Kolhapur



Bhavani of Tuljapur



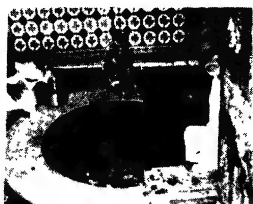
Parasuram - Phede



Panduranga & Rukhmai



Gopuram of Pandharpur



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Chandrabagh river - Pandharpur



Samadhi of saints



Toilet Scene - Cave 17 - Ajanta



14
Bodhisattva Padmapani



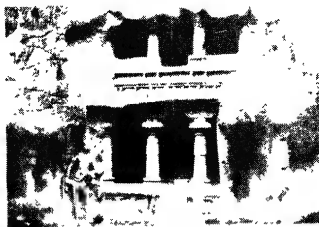
Mahamaya - Cave No.



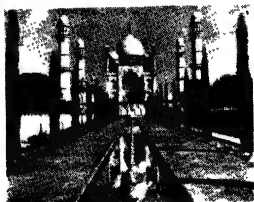
Facade of Cave No. 79 - Ellora



Jyothirlinga - Siva Temple - Kailasnath Temple - Ellora



Ajantha Dotal Cave



Bibika Maqbara - Aurangabad



Panchakki - Water Mill - Aurangabad



Ganesh Temple - Morgaon



Saint Dhyaneswar Mandir - Alandi



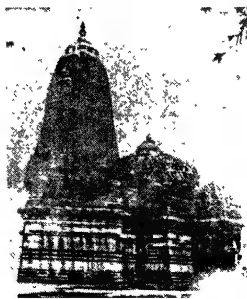
Tuljapur Temple



Shirdhi Baba



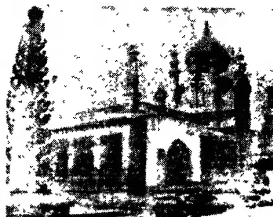
Mahadwar of Alandi Temple



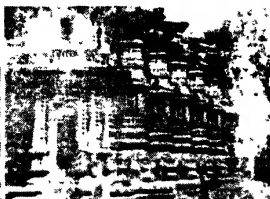
Thrayambakeshwar Temple - Nashik



The Wall - Bhint - Alandi



Khandoba temple - Jejuri



Mahalakshmi Temple



Mahalakshmi Temple - Kolhapur



Sevagram Ashram



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